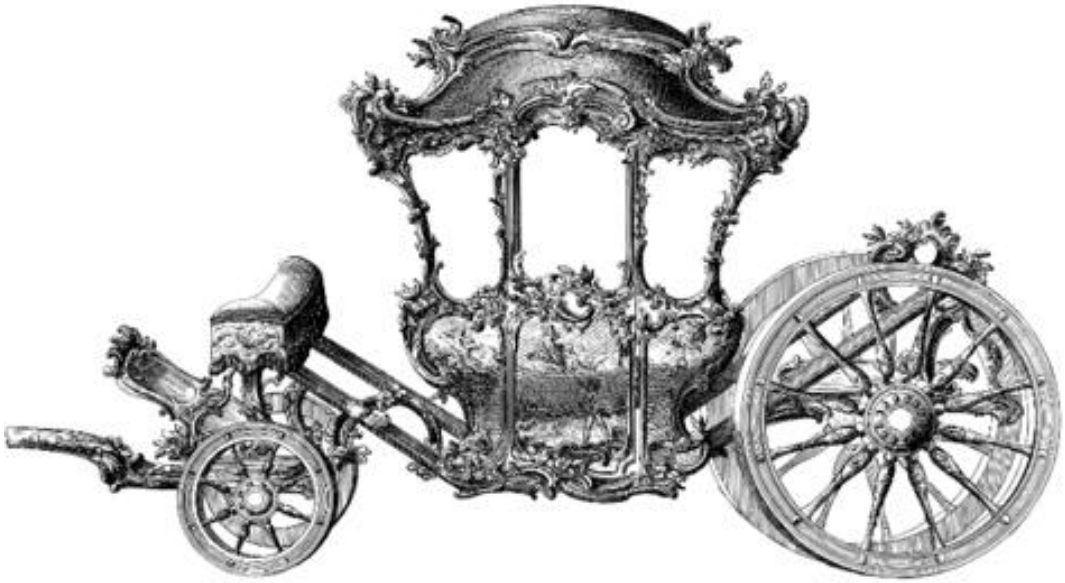
THE
MIDNIGHT
KING
REBECCA F. KENNEY

# THE MIDNIGHT KING



REBECCA F. KENNEY

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For my sister, who gave me the seed of an idea
that grew into this book.
Your love and support mean so much to me.

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

**These characters are morally gray.**

That means they will do things that are *wrong*. Just like you do. Yeah, I see you. You're thinking of that one time when you did something bad. Or if you're like me, it was a bunch of times. (Let's be real here.)

The point is, unless you're willing to see these characters mess up badly, and love them anyway, you might as well stop reading right now.

But if you're self-aware enough to recognize your own shades of gray, and accept the messiness of fictional characters…

Well, then, you're my people.

Also… this is not historical fantasy. I'm not accurately portraying a specific time period. This is a fantasy world reminiscent of early 1900s Europe, but with the Fae realm existing in parallel to the mortal one. If you like "My Lady Jane," "A Knight's Tale," "Bridgerton," and similar shows and movies that have a few modern elements in a faux-historic or fantasy setting, you'll enjoy this book.

**For those who might wonder about the crossover**—YES. Yes, this book ties together my Wicked Darlings series and my Beloved Villains series. You don't have to have read anything else in those series to read this—it can totally stand on its own, but if you've read *A Court of Sugar and Spice*, you'll be pleased by a certain cameo appearance.

Both the Wicked Darlings and Beloved Villains series exist in a very broad universe with many different planets, solar systems, and realms. Magic (and magical races/species) will operate differently depending on the world of each book, but in this one, things are very similar to the magic of the Wicked Darlings series. I promise the worldbuilding isn't tough to follow at all.

**Still with me? Cool. Come on in.**

**We're about to have a good time.**

Brief mention of suicide ideation, parent suicide,
and sexual assault.
Family death, murder, violence, abusive family dynamic,
dubious consent

## PLAYLIST

"Miracle Man"—Bebe Rexha

"In the Night"—Fly By Midnight

"Make You Mine"—2AM Club

"Marry the Night"—Adam Lambert cover (Lady Gaga)

"Illusion"—Dua Lipa

"What This Could Be"—Joe Jonas

"Cherry Bomb"—The Runaways

"Surprise Surprise"—Celine Dion

"I Can Do It With A Broken Heart"—Taylor Swift

"Steady Hand"—Saint Motel

# PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Celinda: Seh-LYN-dah
Killian: KILL-ee-an
Lentula: Len-TOOL-ah
Laurier: LOR-ee-ay
Amisa: Ah-MEE-sah
Vashli: VASH-lee
Úna: OO-nah

# 1

I'm so fucking tired of doing *everything*.

Fate forbid my stepsisters should break a nail scrubbing the two porcelain tubs in which they soak every night amid rainbow swirls of Madam Lentula's Seduction Potion or Rejuvenating Foam.

Rejuvenating, my ass. Not like they need it, either. Amisa is twenty and Vashli is twenty-two, while I'll be twenty-seven on my next birthday. In this kingdom, an unmarried woman this close to thirty is considered a reject. Unwanted goods. People cast sidelong glances at such a woman, wondering why no one has claimed her yet. Of course something must be wrong with her.

I'd be a lot happier if I could persuade myself that I don't want to be married, have children, or run my own household. The trouble is, I want every single one of those things, and it's beginning to look as if I will never have them.

I swish the rag around in the bucket again and slop it onto the bathroom floor. My knees hurt from the hard tiles, but I have to clean up all the spilled powders and splattered cosmetics, because if they sit there overnight, they'll leave stains, and I'll suffer for it.

If my stepsisters didn't act like a pair of tornadoes in their huge bathroom, I wouldn't have to clean it every day. But as it is, this chore has become part of my nightly routine.

My neck aches, so I pause, tilting my head aside until I hear the light pop of my bones realigning. A low headache thrums behind my right eye, threatening to bloom into agony unless I get to bed soon. I still need to go downstairs, close the drapes, turn out the lights, and make sure the doors are locked. If my stepmother Gilda rises in the night and finds anything out of place…

A shudder runs over my whole body, and I scrub more assiduously than ever.

An hour later I've finished all my tasks, and I can finally descend into the cellar, to the cot beside the coal bin where I snatch a few hours of sleep each night. I try not to think about the way the coal dust has probably sifted into my lungs, or the way I cough a little more each day. My nightly proximity to the coal bin is one reason why my step-family has taken to calling me "Cinders" instead of Celinda.

To me, the use of coal is yet another symptom of the dysfunction in this house. Electrical power has come to most of the cities, and we use it for lights, but my stepmother refuses to install any type of electrical heating, mostly because of the cost. Keeping my stepsisters outfitted in the latest style uses up most of the money we receive from my late father's estate each month. Thank Fate it's doled out to us from a trust, or my stepmother and her daughters would have decimated it by now.

It hurts that most of the vast fortune I was supposed to inherit has been squandered. If I'd been in charge of the money, I would have spent less on clothes and accessories, and more on repairs and modernizations for Eisling House and its grounds. I would have invested some of the monthly stipend in stable businesses, where it could steadily earn interest.

But none of that is a priority for my stepmother. She focuses on immediate control, on the rush that she gets when she exerts power over someone. Her daughters are her sole investment in the future, so she pours money into making them as noticeable and fashionable

as possible. Beyond what she spends on them, her own habits must be fueled—her love of gambling and her propensity for drinking too much.

If I could leave now, I would. But the anklet on my right leg ensures that I remain trapped here. It's the same golden band my stepmother clasped around my father's ankle on their wedding day. A family heirloom, she said. A token of respect to the ancestors. But it turned out to be much more than that.

Gilda has never told me where she got the anklet, or who made it. Whatever its origin, the anklet has a single purpose—to bind one human being to the will of another. As the object's master, Gilda can choose someone to wear the anklet, and once it is clasped, no one else can remove it. When she gives commands to the person wearing the anklet, those orders must be obeyed.

She cannot control thoughts, only actions and words, so my inner life remains my own. But everything else that I am belongs to her.

Once, when Gilda was drunk, which is increasingly often these days, she explained that she can only transfer the anklet to someone else on the day of a family death or the night of a family wedding.

I don't know who wore the anklet before she ensnared my father, but he couldn't endure it for more than a year or so. He died when I was nine—bled out after cutting off his own foot. He was so desperate to remove the anklet that he was willing to risk death. And death obligingly liberated him.

In finding his freedom, my father sealed my fate. But I don't blame him for seeking a way out of bondage. Now that I'm older, I can imagine the horror it must have been, working himself to the bone every day for my stepmother and serving her in bed every night.

I try not to think about it. But in my worst nightmares, I watch him suffer, and I see him the way I found him—lying in the garden, pale as the white stone of the fountain, his glassy eyes fixed unseeing on the sky. Blood soaked the soil around his residual limb and glimmered on the anklet, which was still clutched in his stiff fingers.

If only I'd taken the anklet and hidden it somewhere—buried it, maybe. But I was a child. I could barely comprehend his death, let alone think about protecting myself.

By sunset, I was wearing the anklet in his place, bound to Gilda until she has the opportunity and the motive to place it on someone else.

It feels as if I've barely closed my eyes before my silver pocket watch jangles on the battered nightstand beside my cot. The watch is the only treasure I own, a gift from my father when I was very small. It's Faerie-made, but simpler than their usual craftsmanship. My father told me he purchased it from a tinker shortly after I was born.

Gilda enjoys taking away everything that brings me joy, but since the watch possesses no magic except the ability to wake me at a specific time, I've been allowed to keep it. After all, she wouldn't want me oversleeping. I'm the one who does all the chores.

I roll over and press the little button on top of the watch to stop the tinny music of the alarm. Flipping it over, I trace my fingertip over the words engraved on the back.

*All souls crave it, but none receive more than the measure granted by Fate.*

A simple enough riddle. And I suppose most people crave more time, but lately I've been wishing for less of it. I've been aching for the end of this existence.

When those thoughts surface, I push them down. I don't want to reach the same pinnacle of agonized despair my father did. I'm still holding onto a frayed cord of hope.

But that cord is beginning to split apart. It's only a matter of time before it breaks, and I fall into the black chasm that yawns below me.

Inserting my thumb into the slit of the pocket watch, I pop it open and inspect the pearly face. There are barely discernible letters written in a circle along the edge, just beyond the numbers.

*Touch a tear on the face, and a kiss grants his grace.*

I've never been able to figure out what that means.

Closing the watch, I slide its chain around my neck and drop it inside my dress. As always, I arrange my collar to hide the hint of silver, just in case my stepmother might change her mind and decide to confiscate it.

The morning's work progresses as usual. I take care of the animals first—two cows, some chickens, a pair of horses, a few goats, and a fat pig I've named Lord Hogmorton. I dread the day when I'm told to kill him. Knowing my stepmother, she won't want to pay the butcher to perform the task—she'll make me do it, partly to save money, and partly because, despite my best efforts, she has figured out that I'm fond of the pig.

Anything I care about is sure to be used against me, so I've perfected a bland, apathetic expression. If I pretend I don't care, she has fewer weapons with which to torture me.

Unfortunately, my stepsister Vashli overheard me talking to Lord Hogmorton a few weeks ago and told her mother. So his days are probably numbered.

After the outdoor animals are taken care of, I must tend to the indoor animals—the kind that walk on two legs. They're far less pleasant. No matter how carefully I tailor the breakfast to their individual preferences, they're sure to find something wrong.

This morning is no exception. The moment I set Amisa's plate in front of her, she wrinkles her nose. "The eggs are too moist, Cinders."

I stare at the very dry scramble on her plate. If I'd cooked the eggs any longer, they would have been brown.

"Honestly, can't you ever get anything right?" Amisa pouts as if she's two, not twenty. "You know I despise runny scrambled eggs."

"I can cook them a little longer for you," I offer.

"But the rest of my food will get cold."

"Then what would you like me to do?"

"Cinders," says my stepmother warningly. "Mind your tone. Throw that plate of food to the pig, and fix a new one."

Keeping my tone as even as possible, I reply, "There aren't enough eggs for another plate, my lady."

*My lady.* That's what she has insisted I call her, ever since she and her daughters came home with my father. I had no warning of his impending marriage. He went to oversee one of his shipyards in a distant town while I stayed with my governess, a woman who had been with me since my mother died when I was three. When my father returned, he was married. My new stepmother and her little girls moved in, and my governess, whom I loved dearly, was dismissed the same day.

I began to hate Gilda then, though I didn't fully understand how evil she was until months later.

Bound as I am by the various rules my stepmother has laid upon me, there's little I can do by way of vengeance. But I do take pleasure in giving her bad news. When I mention the lack of eggs, I relish the way her eyes widen slightly with alarm. She knows as well as I do that the house and its property are declining due to poor management and dwindling funds, but until now, she has managed to keep the knowledge from her daughters.

"Not enough eggs?" asks Amisa shrilly. "What is she talking about, Mother?"

I cut in before Gilda can reply. "Instead of buying chickens at the market, we've been roasting hens from our own flock. So there are fewer birds to provide eggs."

Gilda's eyes flash a rebuke and inwardly I cringe, unsure if I've pushed her too far. But she only turns to Amisa and says evenly, "Eat your breakfast."

"But—"

"Now, Amisa." When she uses that tone, not even her pampered daughters dare to cross her. I suppress an instinctive shudder and retreat to the kitchen.

There's one egg left, so I fry it quickly and gobble it down while it's so hot that the runny yolk burns my tongue. I've learned to consume whatever food is leftover, as quickly as possible, or my other stepsister, Vashli, will claim it. She's the quieter of the two, and finds refuge in sensory pleasures like food and wine.

Once, I thought perhaps Vashli and I could be friends, but she seems to despise me as deeply as Gilda does. When she does speak

to me, her words cut far deeper than Amisa's, because she takes the time to consider and craft phrases that are especially cruel. She always smiles after delivering her vicious comments, as if causing me pain is one of the true joys in her life. She and her mother are identical in that respect.

Within the hour, Worden enters the kitchen and asks me to tell the ladies that their carriage is ready. Worden is an older man who stops by Eisling House to do some of the heavier stable chores and repairs. The way things are going, we won't be able to pay him much longer. And he's already the cheapest stablehand and gardener to be had in this area. He moves slowly and jerkily due to injuries sustained in the border wars a few decades past. Not many people are willing to hire him, and I hate to think what will happen to him if we're forced to let him go.

I hand Worden the rest of my black coffee, and he downs it gratefully before going back outside. I return to the breakfast room and declare, "The carriage is ready."

As usual, my stepmother and her girls leave the dining room in utter disarray. The breakfast table looks as if a herd of pigs descended to gorge themselves upon the food, rather than three fine ladies. I know they understand table manners; they manage to remain neat and proper when they're dining out. But when they're at home, they go out of their way to create the biggest possible mess, just so I have to clean it up.

An outsider might think I'm just tired and bitter, that I'm seeing malicious intent where there is none. But I know these three women all too well. I know they do it on purpose.

Thankfully the three of them will be out of the house for a while, off to Lady Something-or-Other's sewing party. Precious little sewing will take place, I'll wager. I've served at one or two such parties, and it's mostly fashion, gossip, and a critique of all the eligible gentlemen in the area, which, with our proximity to the capital, always leads to everyone twittering breathlessly about the young Crown Prince.

Prince Brantley is about twenty-three, and he's made it clear he wants a wife, sooner rather than later. In this country, kings retire

around age fifty and allow their eldest child to take the throne. And since the King is about forty-eight, it's high time for our one and only prince to find himself a partner.

The King himself is extraordinarily handsome, judging by the portraits I've seen of him in the newspapers I scavenge from other houses. His son is also attractive. I swear, every unmarried woman of marriageable age—and even some of the married ones—would melt into submissive puddles at the Prince's feet if he so much as looked at them.

As for me, I've got no time to think about submission, or puddles, unless it's the puddles of spilled cream under the breakfast table. Sophie, my stepmother's enormous gray cat, has already discovered the mess and is crouched low on fluffy paws, daintily dipping her little pink tongue into the cream.

"That's going to make you sick," I tell her. "You'll leave a mess somewhere in the house and I'll have to clean it up."

She stares at me and continues the dip, dip, dip of her tongue. She is the haughtiest, puffiest, most disdainful of cats, and secretly I love her dearly. I like to think she loves me too. She did bring me a dead mouse once.

Contrary to my stepmother's wishes, Sophie enjoys being outside, roaming the gardens or inspecting the barn animals like the queen she is. No matter how cold it is, she wants to be free. I've been ordered not to let her out, but I perceived a gray area in that command, and sometimes I happen to leave the back door ajar… by accident, of course. Not with any distinct purpose in mind.

Sophie is one creature my stepmother can't control, and I glory in that fact.

Just when I've carefully balanced an entire stack of breakfast dishes and I'm preparing to carry them into the kitchen, someone raps at the front door. After a moment's dithering, I set the dishes back down as carefully as I can and hurry to answer the knock.

On the doorstep is a tall, scrawny young man in royal livery, with a huge satchel full of letters. He hands one to me.

"An invitation to the palace," he drones. "By the grace of His Illustrious Highness the Crown Prince. Your speedy response is

requested and expected.”

# 2

"Wait… what?" I blink at the wax-sealed envelope in my hand.

The messenger is already turning away, heading back down the steps to the carriage drive in front of the house. Clearly he doesn't wish to answer any questions.

"Fine," I mutter, closing the door and laying the envelope in the silver tray on the side table, where I always put the correspondence for Gilda and her daughters. There are never any letters for me.

Except… this envelope is addressed "To the Ladies of the House." And technically, I am also a lady of the house by birthright. So technically, I would be within my rights to open the invitation.

*An invitation to the palace*, the messenger said. But when? And why? There were many such invitations in the messenger's satchel. We're not the only recipients.

With my fingertip, I stroke the edge of the envelope. If I dare to peek inside, I'll be punished. I'm not sure satisfying my curiosity is worth the price I'll have to pay.

Gilda is a connoisseur of painful and humiliating punishments. Since the anklet I wear binds me to her will, I'm forced to do anything she wants—and what she wants varies wildly depending on

her mood. Sometimes I'm forced to pull my hair out, bite my own lips until they bleed, put my fingertip in a candle flame, or dance until I faint from exhaustion. Once, she made me eat mouse shit. Another time, she forced me to go out naked into the winter night and shovel the front path. I almost didn't survive that one.

I've learned to separate my conscious self from my body during those moments, to distance my emotions from whatever I'm suffering at the time. But the memory of those punishments is powerful enough to make me draw back from the invitation and leave it sitting unopened on the tray.

For the next few hours, I continue with the chores, until the front door bursts open and Gilda rushes in, trailed by her daughters, both of whom are shrieking, "Did we get one? Did we get one? Oh, we did! Oh, what does it say?"

"I presume it says exactly what Lady Hausen's invitation said," replies my stepmother testily. "Give me space to breathe, you noisy fools!"

The girls withdraw slightly, but the very flowers on their bonnets are trembling with anticipation as their mother opens the letter. I come to the doorway of the sitting room where I was dusting, cautiously interested in the contents of the envelope.

"There are going to be five grand balls at the palace—parties like no one has ever seen," says Gilda, her eyes widening as she reads the missive. "The Crown Prince has invited every unmarried woman between the ages of twenty and thirty-five, from the capital and its surrounding towns and boroughs. On the sixth night, at a great feast, the Crown Prince will choose his bride!"

"His bride?" shrieks Amisa.

Gilda flips the card over and inspects the back side, frowning. "There's nothing else. No further information, and no mention of family members escorting their eligible daughters to the ball."

"In this kingdom, women over twenty don't need an escort," Vashli points out.

Gilda purses her lips, looking deeply displeased. I have no doubt she wants to accompany her daughters to the event, and the idea

that she isn't invited piques her terribly. Which delights me more than it should.

"What I want to know," Vashli continues, "is why he's inviting *all* the unmarried women. Shouldn't he invite only those of noble blood or good breeding?"

"There's some jibber-jabber about that at the beginning of the letter," says Gilda. "Something about equal opportunities, all social classes being represented, nonsense of that sort. Not worth bothering about. What's important is that the first ball is being held in less than a month. Five balls in row, one every night, all in the same week—I never heard of such a thing! You girls will each need five new dresses—no, *six* if we count the feast at the end!"

Six new dresses apiece… My heart sinks. There's no way we can afford so many new gowns, which means some of their old ones will have to be made over and altered. I know who will be saddled with that burden, not to mention the labor of mending their stockings, gloves, ribbons and jewelry. They'll want their perfume bottles refilled and their stock of hair products replenished, which means a trip to the perfumer's shop, and that won't come cheap.

"How are we to pay for it all?" The words slip from my mouth before I can stop them.

Gilda and her daughters look at me, apparently shocked that I dared to speak.

My stepmother's eyes harden. "You'll find more things for us to sell, Cinders. And I know of at least one thing we haven't sold yet that might fetch a decent price."

Since I was around thirteen, my stepmother has threatened to sell my virginity. I sincerely believe the only reason she hasn't done it yet is because she's afraid our neighbors would find out, and that word would spread in her social circles. She can't risk her reputation being soiled, or her daughters will lose their chance of finding respectable husbands.

But that doesn't stop her from holding the threat over my head. I should be used to it by now, but the idea still has the power to strike terror in my heart. Deep down, I fear that someday I'll push her too far, or she'll be too desperate, and she'll use me as a final

method of currency. I won't have a choice. I won't be able to say no, or fight, or scream, because she'll command me to submit to whatever man is willing to pay the highest price.

Long ago, when she first fixed the band around my ankle, she laid a command on me that I must never speak of the anklet to anyone, and that I would never kill, harm, or threaten her or her daughters. I'm also forbidden to touch weapons, with the only exceptions being necessary implements for cooking or chores, such as a pitchfork or a kitchen knife.

For a long time I never wanted to harm my step-family. I thought if I worked hard and behaved sweetly that Gilda might eventually love me. Not that I really wanted her love, after what happened to my father—but it was the only positive outcome I could see, the only way for my life to become more bearable.

Years of cruelty killed that hope and engendered darker dreams —dreams of running away, dreams of killing Gilda and taking the anklet off myself. But though I've tried to carry out those plans, I can't. The magic won't allow it.

Once or twice, when I've been out running errands, I've ventured into bookshops and spent precious minutes searching frantically for books about Fae objects and artifacts. But I found very little information, and none that pertained to my dilemma.

The palace library would have a wider selection of books. I've heard there's a vault full of volumes about Faerie lore and magic. If any place holds the answer to my freedom, it's that library. And until today, I never had the slightest hope of accessing it. But the scented card in my stepmother's hands might be the key.

"I can make over some of the older gowns to look new and stylish," I venture. "I can mend the gloves and stockings, too. And I'll find something to sell, some way to get a few new dresses."

My stepmother's gaze narrows with suspicion. "How uncharacteristically accommodating of you, Cinders."

I swallow and say, as respectfully as I can, "I'm happy to help. Perhaps, if there's one dress that's out of fashion, that nobody wants, I could adapt it for myself? After I finish everything else, of course."

"Adapt it for yourself?" Amisa exclaims. "What an odd thing to say! Where would you wear it? To bed in the cellar?" She snorts with laughter.

"I would wear it to the Prince's parties," I say quietly.

"To… to the…" Amisa gapes at me. "Oh gods, she actually thinks she has a chance of enticing the Prince! Oh Mother, it's too much!" She dissolves into peals of laughter, joined by her sister.

I grip the duster so tightly I'm afraid it will break, and I look into my stepmother's eyes. "Please. Please let me go to one of the parties. Just one. I swear I'll do everything you want, and I'll do it cheerfully. I won't find loopholes or drag my feet—I will do everything you say, precisely as you want it done, if only I can go just once."

"Girls," says Gilda, in a voice like black stone, "go upstairs. Now."

The girls' laughter fades, and they hurry to obey.

I know why she's sending them away. Throughout our years as a dysfunctional family, Gilda has managed to hide from her daughters the exact reason why I obey her every command. The worst punishments have always been conducted in secret, with my stepsisters only seeing the results, never the acts themselves. It's her one decent trait, that she tries to protect her daughters from being exposed to the worst parts of her nature.

With the girls gone, she turns her gaze on me. "You seem to think you have something to bargain with, Cinders. You do not. Why would I make some sort of foolish deal with you, when you are forced to obey me either way? If I wanted you willing and cheerful, I would simply command it, and you would assume the correct attitude. But as you know, I prefer you morose and miserable." Her smile is icy, merciless. "It's more fun that way."

Teeth clenched, I look down at the floor, conscious that pleading or protest will only make her more determined to deny me.

"Finish the chores," says Gilda. "Then return to me, and I will give you specific instructions for the making over of the old gowns and the purchase of new ones."

Furious tears blur my vision as I turn mechanically away from her and continue dusting the furniture in the sitting room.

My father used to tell me I was clever, that he'd never seen a child so adept at solving every little problem that came her way. Sometimes he would buy wooden puzzle boxes for me, just to admire how quickly I figured them out.

"This puzzle is too hard, Father," I whisper as I drag the duster along the mantel. "It broke you, and it's breaking me."

Three weeks. I have three weeks ahead of me, during which I must somehow persuade Gilda to let me attend the Prince's ball—not all, just *one* of them. One night during which I can sneak away to the royal library and find the secret that will set me free.

# 3

Three weeks, and I'm no closer to a solution.

It's hard to solve puzzles when you're worn to the bone, working incessantly past the point of exhaustion. I always serve as free labor for my stepfamily, but they've never been this ruthless before. There's so much to be done, every single day—the regular housework, the cooking, the care of the animals, the errands, the sewing, and the repairs to my stepsisters' accessories.

I sleep only three or four hours a night, and I barely have time to swallow a few bites of food at meals.

Tomorrow night is the first ball, and I don't think I'd have the energy to attend, even if I were allowed to. I can feel my body breaking down from lack of rest and nutrition. My stepfamily is using me up, spending me like coin, and they don't care if I die. It's foolish of them, because if this destroys me, they'll have no one to do their work. Although I suppose if I dropped dead, Gilda would simply find someone else to wear the anklet.

And then it hits me, as I'm brushing Vashli's dance slippers. A solution so neat and so perfect that I can't believe I didn't think of it before.

I leap up immediately and rush to the study, where Gilda is sitting at my father's desk, poring over the family accounts.

"Suppose one of your daughters catches the eye of the Crown Prince and marries him," I say breathlessly. "You'd want to remove *this* from me and place it on the Prince, wouldn't you?" I point to my right ankle, where the anklet lies concealed beneath my woolen stockings.

Gilda looks up at me, her mouth grim but her eyes full of interest.

"You would effectively control the entire kingdom," I say. "Imagine it. What if I go along with the girls to the ball as your spy? I'll find information that you can leverage to ensure that the Prince chooses one of your daughters. I'll coach them on what to say to catch his attention. I'll do everything in my power to ensure that when he selects a bride, it's Amisa or Vashli."

She sets down her pen and laces her fingers together, regarding me with an intensity that speeds up my heart rate even more and shortens my breath. I have to fight the sudden urge to cough.

"I'm smart, quick, and capable, more so than your daughters," I say. "You know it's true. I can help them. I can make this happen. And if I do, on your daughter's wedding night, you'll remove the anklet from me and put it on the Crown Prince. I'll be free, and you will have more power than you ever dreamed of."

"I've already considered the implications of a royal wedding," says Gilda. "But you're very bold to assume I need your help. Tell me, Cinders… how exactly do you plan to get close enough to the Prince to glean any useful information? How will you find this *leverage* that I can use? How will *you*, who have never been with a man, teach my daughters to charm the Crown Prince?" She chuckles darkly. "Forgive me if I don't see this vision of yours very clearly."

"One chance," I say. "That's all I'm asking. One night, and if I don't return with useful information, you'll punish me for my failure."

"Indeed I will." She smiles, as if she finds the prospect pleasing. "Very well. You may attend the ball tomorrow. Find one of Amisa's old gowns to wear—Vashli's will be too large for your bony little body. But Cinders, hear me when I say that if you do anything

disloyal, or if you return without any useful leverage, I will sell your virgin pussy to the highest bidder I can find. And this time I mean it. I already have a lead on a duke who likes his women blond, slender, and untouched. He's a very private man, and he would pay well for a night with you, I have no doubt."

"Then we have a bargain?" I try to keep my voice from trembling.

"Secure a marriage to the Prince for one of my daughters, and I will set you free," she replies.

There's a glint in her eye when she says it. I don't doubt that when she promises to set me free, she's really planning to kill me. But she needs to think that I believe her, that I trust her to fulfill her promise. Meanwhile I'll be searching the royal library for my own path to freedom. And if by chance she does keep her word, I'll happily yield control of the entire kingdom to my wicked stepmother if it means I can run away and never see her again.

Maybe that makes me a terrible person.

My governess told me once that there are no terrible people, just desperate ones. But I believe some people, like my stepmother, are already wicked, whether by nature or nurture. Desperation only makes them worse.

It won't be easy to fulfill my bargain with my stepmother *and* do my research on magical objects, but it's better than staying in this house, wasting away to nothing.

I bob a curtsy to Gilda and hurry out of the study before she can reconsider. I just have a few more pairs of shoes to brush, and then I need to find a suitable dress, one that I can turn into something halfway decent by tomorrow afternoon.

Late that night, I sew for hours, stitching on ribbons and lace, closing ripped seams, replacing buttons. My eyelids feel itchy and puffy. My fingertips are sore from pushing the needle in and out, in and out.

I finish a seam, knot the thread, and bite it off. Then I stand up and shake out the dress so I can see the result.

It's not my best work, partly because I was only allowed to use castoff trimmings. A dreadful certainty coils in my stomach that

when I step into the palace, I will realize just how pathetic I look compared to everyone else. The one advantage is that I'll be easy to overlook, which could play in my favor.

After draping the dress across the table, I plop down onto the kitchen chair again and rub my eyes. Then I lean over, my arms folded on the table and my head resting on them. I'm only going to close my eyes for a moment…

Something thumps onto the tabletop. Instinctively I know that it's a cat landing near my head, but the sound is more muffled than it should be.

I'm wide awake in an instant, shooting upright in alarm—but it's too late.

Sophie has landed right on my dress, her claws pricking the delicate fabric. And as I watch, horrified, she drops a bloodied mouse carcass onto the lace I painstakingly sewed to the bodice. Then she begins kneading the gown enthusiastically with both paws, immensely pleased with herself.

I want to scream. I want to throw her and the mouse off my dress and fling them against the wall—

But I don't. Because this is Sophie loving me, in her misguided, pompous, feline way, and I can't bear the thought of returning such love with cruelty. Not when love is so rare in my world.

Gently I pluck the mouse off the lace, cringing at the bloodstain it leaves behind. "You caught a mouse?" I praise Sophie, my voice strained and weary. "Such a good girl." I pick her up, giant fluffy monster that she is, and her claws stick in the satin right before she lets go, creating tiny imperfections I can't repair.

I bury my face in her soft fur, not wanting to see the ruin of my work. She lets me cuddle her for about five seconds. Then she squirms and leaps out of my arms, only to shake herself and pace grandly off into another room.

With shaking fingers I collect the dress. It's ruined.

I pull out my father's watch and flip it open. It confirms what I feared… that I slept too long with my head on the table. It's after five o'clock in the morning. I need to begin the care and feeding of the animals, then start breakfast.

Even if I could find time to remove the bloody lace, there are no more scraps that will match the trim on the dress. And nothing can fix the damage done to the delicate fabric by Sophie's claws.

"Fuck my life." I whisper it aloud, while a tear falls from my lower lashes onto the face of the watch. I wipe it off with my thumb, then tuck the watch back into my work dress.

Slowly I shuffle to the back door and slide my stockinged feet into my battered leather boots. I put on my threadbare coat and wrap a thick shawl around myself, knowing it won't be enough to keep out the pre-dawn cold. I dig my fingerless gloves out of the deep pockets of the coat, then pick up the milk pail.

When I open the back door, the wind hits me like an angry fist. It feels personal, a brutal attack. The whole world and all the gods are battering me, seeing how long I'll last before I break. Did my father feel like this on his last day?

Holding one hand up to shield my face from the wind, I struggle across the yard toward the barn. It's a dilapidated mess, with gaps so big the cold pours right in. Not much shelter for the poor cows.

The ground isn't frozen yet, but it's only a matter of days before winter comes in earnest and the soil freezes solid. Judging by the keen, fresh scent of the air, we might have our first snowfall tonight.

I yank the barn door open a crack and wedge myself and the bucket through the gap. Despite the drafts leaking through the cracks, there's a steamy heat pouring off the cows as they stand close together. The biggest one, Merry, lows in gentle greeting, and my sore heart nearly bursts at the simple acknowledgement. I drop the bucket and lean against her, my face pressed to her neck. Her warm, curly coat is coarser than Sophie's, but it's comforting all the same.

"Hey, beautiful," I murmur. A tear traces down my cheek and trembles on my lips.

The youngest of the three cows, whom I've named Crabapple, is about eight months old, the result of a local farmer's kindness. He lent us his bull last year, as a favor to me after I made his wife a beautiful quilt from snippets of dresses my stepsisters outgrew. I got

to know the couple through visiting their stall on market days, and when I found out the wife was pregnant, I began crafting the quilt.

Not long after Merry's successful breeding session, my stepmother discovered my friendship with the farmer's family, and she ordered me never to speak to them or buy from them again. A month ago, the farmer's wife spotted me at the market and called out to me, but I could not answer, no matter how hard I tried. I struggled so viciously that the anklet burned my leg. There's a recent scar beneath the gold band now, layered with other similar scars. They are warnings and reminders that my will is not strong enough to dispel magic.

I pat Crabapple's nose, then pitch some fresh straw from the back loft into the trough. The third cow, Annabelle, seems half-asleep, more sluggish than usual. She's been losing weight, and I'm concerned about her. It takes some coaxing and a little hand-feeding to get her to begin taking mouthfuls of hay.

I greet the horses next. I'll need to muck out their stalls later, but first I fill their feed bags from the dwindling supply of oats.

At last I set the stool in place and sit down to milk Merry. With each firm roll and squeeze of her teats, each hiss of the milk hitting the inside of the pail, I feel my distress easing slightly. The rhythm of it is soothing. At least here, among the animals, I am temporarily safe, and I know exactly what to do.

Once the pail is full, I set it on a shelf and move around Annabelle to inspect a sore I noticed on her flank. "That looks painful, sweet thing," I croon to her, touching the edge of the wound lightly. Her flank shudders and she shifts a step away, but continues to eat. "We'll have to get the farrier out here to look at you. Not sure where we'll find the money to pay him, but—"

"If you'll allow me," says a voice.

I startle violently and clap my hand over my mouth, stifling a scream that would surely have panicked the cows.

From a shadowed corner of the barn, a figure emerges—tall and lean, dressed in an unbuttoned white shirt beneath a purple tailcoat. His slim legs are encased in gray pants, and he wears thigh-high boots decorated with strings of purple beads. Violet gems glitter

against his bare chest and twinkle along the edges of his pointed ears. His chin-length hair is dark purple at the roots and lavender at the tips, and as he approaches, he tosses it back with a sweep of his long tapered fingers, each one sparkling with rings.

He's smiling brightly, graciously, almost eagerly. As if he's delighted to meet me and already expects us to be great friends. His features are practically ethereal, blessed with a beauty so pure he couldn't possibly be human.

He's a Faerie. He must be. But why in the name of Fate is he in my barn?

"What the actual fuck?" I exclaim.

He hesitates, a soft laugh breaking from him. The laughter is ridiculously beautiful, too. I'm beginning to hate him just for looking the way he does, like a sparkly violet among earthen clods, and yes, I feel like one of the clods.

"I always try to avoid startling people," he says apologetically. "But I rarely succeed. Mortals can be so terribly jumpy. You're doing very well though. You haven't screamed yet, so—"

He's reaching for Annabelle, and I react with the defensive instinct of a mother bear, snatching up the pitchfork and jabbing it at him. The tines rip through his coat and shirt, grazing him slightly.

"So you're a fighter, not a screamer." He gives me an unbothered smirk. When he passes his hand over the ripped garments, they mend themselves immediately, seamlessly.

Mouth open, I gape at him.

He reaches out toward the cow again, giving me a cautious look. "May I? I promise I intend her no harm."

I clutch the pitchfork tighter, but I don't attack him again.

He places his palm over the sore on Annabelle's side and closes his eyes, his brows bending in concentration. His dark lashes are absurdly luxurious.

When he removes his hand, Annabelle's flank is completely healed. Not a sign of anything amiss. She chuffs and lows contentedly, as if her mood has suddenly improved.

"How did you do that?" I breathe.

"An inherited gift, of sorts. My father can heal living things through magic," the Faerie says. "He likes creating spells in edible form, usually candies and treats. He's excellent at making clothes, too. I'm only half-Fae, but I was born within sight of a mirrored moon by a lavender lake on the night of the seasonal shift, which makes me rather unique. I can heal animals with a touch—though healing humans is a bit more complicated—and I can create beautiful glamoured clothing or mend existing clothes. And I have other gifts as well. My older sister has always been rather jealous of what I can do. She got the wings, but I got most of the magic." He grins at me, as if any of what he just said made sense.

"What are you doing *here*?"

His lavender eyes narrow slightly. "Not even a thank you?"

"Answer the question."

He shrugs. "It's quite simple. You called me."

"I did not!"

The Faerie sighs. "You have something on your person… a ring, a pocket watch, or a necklace with an inscription, yes?"

My hand goes to my chest, pressing the spot where the pocket watch is hidden beneath my dress. "Yes…"

"An old friend of my family used to make such trinkets—objects specifically designed to carry or conduct magic, even in this mortal realm. When he died, I inherited a collection of these items, and I placed spells on them so the objects will summon me when their owner has a great need. May I see yours?"

My pocket watch summoned him? I think of the inscription inside, the one I've read a thousand times.

*Touch a tear on the face, and a kiss grants his grace.*

I dropped a tear on the face of the watch, then touched it to brush it away. And somehow that act summoned this Faerie. Someone whose magic might be able to set me free.

Hope bolts through my chest like a wild horse. Hastily I set down the pitchfork and dig out the pocket watch from its resting place between my breasts. I don't take the chain from my neck, though—I'm too cautious to hand the object over to him.

To see the watch, the Faerie has to come even closer. He takes it gently from my fingers and opens it.

"Yes, I remember this one," he murmurs. "I was in disguise in a rather unpleasant city, but I met a good-hearted gentleman in a local pub, and we talked for a while. He said his wife had just borne a baby daughter. He was sorry to leave his family so soon after the birth, but he had business obligations to fulfill in order to provide for them."

Sounds like my father. A lump condenses in my throat, and tears sting my eyes.

The Faerie looks up, meeting my gaze. "We spoke of the evils of the world, and its dangers. At the end of the night, I revealed my true self to him and offered him my services, should he ever need them. He said he'd rather have me look out for his daughter in the future, in case he were ever unable to protect her. He used the term 'godfather,' a human tradition in some cultures, I believe. I traded him this pocket watch in exchange for some blood."

"You took his blood?" I repeat, eyeing the pitchfork again.

"Easy there," he chuckles. "Godstars, you're a vicious one, aren't you? I only took a few small vials, for use in my spells. That's how the Fae operate—we make bargains. Something given, something gained. I did your father no harm, trust me. But on that night, I became your Faerie godfather. Once called upon, I would be ready to step in and help you through your troubles."

A bitter, helpless laugh cracks from my lips. "I'm afraid you've come too late. I could have used your help years ago. Anytime in the last seventeen years, really. My father killed himself when I was nine, and ever since then, my existence has been miserable."

"He killed himself?" The Faerie frowns. "That doesn't sound like the man I met."

"His circumstances changed," I reply. "And what's more, he never explained anything about this watch to me. If that story is true, why didn't he tell me about the inscription? Why didn't he explain that I could call on you?"

The Faerie looks rather rueful. "I warned him that the watch could only summon me three times, and that if the summons were

wasted, I would no longer appear. Perhaps he feared that you, as a small child, might call me for some minor tragedy, like dropping your doll down a well."

"What fool drops a doll down a well?"

He shrugs. "I've seen it happen."

"My father should have told me!" My voice is strained, growing shriller by the second as I realize that I could have escaped this torment years ago had I known about the watch. I have always been secretly angry with my father for marrying Gilda in the first place, and now I have yet another reason to rage at his ghost.

The rational part of my brain tells me Father had good reasons for not explaining about the watch when I was small—and after he married Gilda, he was bound by her commands, most likely restricted from asking anyone for help. But rational thinking doesn't do much to ease the anger of a desperate person, and I'm as desperate as they come.

My Faerie godfather looks at me with compassionate concern. "You're clearly in great emotional distress."

"No shit."

"Now that I'm here, I'd like to help you. Name your request."

I open my mouth to tell him about the anklet—and find my tongue bound by the command of my stepmother. She has forbidden me to reveal that secret to anyone. The harder my will presses against the force of her command, the more painfully the anklet burns against my skin.

My mind works swiftly, seeking an alternate route to the freedom I want. The Faerie mended his clothes flawlessly—perhaps he could mend my dress as well. That way I could still attend the ball tonight and seek out the information I need from the library, as well as pursuing the interests of my stepmother.

"You said the watch calls you three times?" I ask.

"Indeed."

"And I can request something each time?"

"Yes."

"Then my first request is this—come back tonight, around half past seven. My stepsisters will have left for the ball by then, and if I

know my stepmother, she'll escort them right to the steps of the palace and then find somewhere to drink and gossip before returning home. So I'll be alone here, and no one will see you."

He frowns. "I don't understand."

"When you return tonight, you will repair my damaged dress so I can attend the Prince's ball. He's hosting five fancy parties so he can choose his bride from among the eligible young ladies of the land." My voice twists with caustic judgment at the extreme privilege of the Prince, but the Faerie doesn't seem to notice.

His lavender eyes brighten until they nearly glow. "A ball? I do love a ball. So you wish to charm and wed the Prince?"

"Oh, no," I exclaim. "I'm not looking for a husband for myself."

"Then I fail to see how attending the ball will solve the troubles that made you weep over your father's watch."

I can't stand the look of fascinated pity in his eyes when he gazes at me. My whole body stiffens with rebellious pride and barely suppressed anger, and my tone turns sardonic. "I was crying because a cat damaged my party dress."

I imagined that excuse would make him view me with disdain, but instead, his eyes soften still more.

"Those were not the tears of a spoiled girl," he says gently. "I felt your pain through the spell that connects me to the watch. You were in agony—deep agony of the soul."

"Your magic is wrong," I retort. "I have no soul. Now begone, and return tonight to fix my dress. Don't be late."

He gives me an amused smile. "Don't worry. I'm never late."

# 4

At almost half past seven, I'm pacing the floor of the sitting room, anxiously awaiting my Faerie godfather's arrival.

As I expected, my stepmother accompanied her daughters into the city and plans to amuse herself elsewhere while they're at the ball. She never misses an opportunity to ingratiate herself into the upper levels of society, and she managed to secure an invitation to a gathering of wealthy ladies about her age, all of whom are just as rabidly eager for their daughters to secure a match to the Crown Prince. No doubt the gathering will be a bloodbath of razor smiles, cutting glances, and vicious words spoken over cups of tea. Or perhaps there will be gambling instead of gossip, and wine instead of tea.

This afternoon, I told my stepmother I didn't feel well, that my dress wasn't ready, and that I wouldn't be attending the ball after all. She smirked, as if she suspected I would back out of the bargain we made, which piqued my pride. Even though she seemed willing to go along with my scheme, on the off chance I might be useful in forwarding her daughters' interests, she's clearly not confident in my ability to fulfill my part of the deal.

The clock strikes once to mark the half hour. As I turn on my heel to pace back across the room, I realize with a jolt that my Faerie godfather is sitting on the sofa. He looks utterly at ease, legs crossed and shoulders relaxed.

"There you are," I say sharply.

"Startled you again, did I?" He grins.

"You did not. I was expecting you."

"And where is the party dress I'm supposed to mend?"

It's directly in his line of sight, draped over the other sofa. I point to it.

"Oh god-stars. *That*?" He raises an eyebrow, and his lip curls disdainfully.

I bristle at the insult to my efforts. "I didn't have much to work with—a castoff dress of my stepsisters and some scraps. I did my best."

"I'm sure you did," he says in a patronizing tone. "I do pity you mortals. So limited by the mundane reality of an existence without magic."

"I don't much care for magic," I reply. "It has never brought me anything but misery."

He glances at me keenly. "Let's see if we can change that, shall we? But before we begin, there's a small matter we need to discuss. The 'granting of my grace,' as your watch says."

I haven't forgotten the second part of the inscription. *A kiss grants his grace*.

"So I need to kiss the watch?" I say hopefully, although I'm fairly sure that's not what it means.

"Very funny," he replies with a knowing smirk. "No, you'll be kissing me. Try not to stab me with anything, there's a good girl."

"This is some Faerie bargain nonsense, isn't it?" I grumble.

"Indeed. Though there are other ways to seal a bargain. One of my favorites involves the joining of other body parts, rather than the lips." His smirk widens to a naughty smile. "Perhaps you'd prefer that?"

Heat suffuses my cheeks. Though I'm a virgin, I'm by no means ignorant on the topic of sex. When I steal newspapers from the

refuse bin of our neighbor down the lane, I sometimes find discarded leaflets among the pages—leaflets full of naughty stories and pictures. I'm not sure who in that house subscribes to the leaflet—whether it's the husband, the wife, or the elderly aunt who lives with them—but I've gained plenty of detailed carnal knowledge from those scavenged papers.

Nevertheless, I don't plan to touch the Faerie beyond what is absolutely necessary. I don't trust him, not for a moment. My father may have had faith in this creature—but he also trusted Gilda.

"A kiss will do," I tell the Faerie, steeling myself for the act. If I kiss him quickly, I won't have to think about it.

He stands up, still with that lazy, suggestive smile on his mouth. Before he can make a move, I seize the lapels of his coat, rise on my toes, and peck his lips lightly before retreating several steps away.

The Faerie stares at me. "That wasn't a kiss. There has to be an exchange."

"Of what? Saliva?" I grimace.

"You act as if I'm some warty toad from the garden," he says with a rueful laugh. "Surely the idea of kissing me can't be that repugnant. Or perhaps you've had bad experiences with kissing as well as with magic."

"No," I reply, averting my eyes.

"Perhaps you've had no experience with kissing at all." His tone is wondering, delighted. "That's the truth, isn't it? You've never kissed a man, and you're a virg—"

"None of that has anything to do with our bargain," I snap. "If the kiss I gave you wasn't good enough, just kiss me and get it over with."

"Just what I've always wanted to hear from a woman," he says dryly. He comes up to me, slipping his long fingers around the back of my head. Then he leans down and kisses me.

His mouth is impossibly smooth and soft. The tip of his tongue probes gently between my lips, and when I part them, his tongue slides into my mouth. Instinctively I open a little more, letting him in. The way his tongue glides against mine is the most arousing

thing I have ever felt. My entire body buzzes awake, flaming up like a dormant fire stirred to life.

But caution sparks in my mind, too. I've read about Faeries, and I know their reputation for charming their way into the hearts and beds of unwary humans. I'm already risking enough as it is—I will not yield my body to someone who might be more dangerous than my stepmother.

Still, the fucker knows how to use his tongue. This kiss is easily the most wonderful thing I've experienced in years. I've been so worn out for weeks that I haven't had any energy or inclination to pleasure myself, and I'm suddenly conscious that my body has needs, powerful ones.

What if I added one more thing to my list of plans for tonight? What if I found someone at the ball, someone human, who could kiss me like this and give me pleasure? My stepmother prizes my virginity and has explicitly forbidden me to have sex with any of the young men in the region… but that command has a few loopholes I can exploit. There might be a delicious freedom in defying her while also pleasing myself.

With a final swirl of his tongue over mine, the Faerie breaks the kiss. "There. A proper exchange has been made, and the bargain is struck. Now take off your clothes."

Shocked, I back away from him, pressing one hand to my stomach and the other to my chest. "What?"

"I could take them off you with magic, but I thought that might be rather rude. Wouldn't you prefer to do it yourself?"

"And why would I undress for you?" I ask, sidling toward the iron poker beside the fireplace.

"I need to see your body, so I can create the right look for you. This shapeless sack you're wearing conceals your form."

"It's not a shapeless sack," I retort, but inwardly I know he's right. The brown dress I'm wearing used to be Vashli's, and it hangs loosely on my body. I see the logic in what he's saying, but the idea of stripping down to my underwear in front of him sends a rush of hot blood into my cheeks. "I'm not comfortable undressing for someone like you."

"Someone like me?" He cocks his head.

"A man—a male—who is very—" *Beautiful*, my mind whispers, but I refuse to say it aloud. "Someone who looks like you."

"I can change the way I look." His form ripples slightly as if I'm seeing it through water, and suddenly he's a plump, pleasant-looking woman with gray hair and lavender eyes. "How's this?"

"What did you… *how* did you…" I can't formulate a coherent sentence—I'm too stupefied.

"It's a glamour. I'm rather good at them." He transforms into a gawky-looking man with spectacles, then into a busty, beautiful woman with raven-black hair. "Any requests?"

"Just yourself will be fine." I'm tempted to ask for the grandmother glamour, since that form does feel less threatening—but I'd rather see him exactly as he is and remember who I'm dealing with.

He reverts to his sparkly purple self and relaxes again, spreading his arms along the back of the sofa.

Drawing a deep breath, I take off my shoes and stockings. Then I pull the dress I'm wearing over my head and lay it aside. Underneath I'm wearing a castoff pair of Amisa's panties, made of soft cotton and lace, but worn nearly threadbare. My bustier is so old that its cups barely support my breasts anymore. I give it a self-conscious tug upward and force myself to meet the Faerie's eyes.

There's pity in his gaze, along with calculated interest as he rises and paces around me, inspecting my body from all sides. I know he's seeing my scars too—marks of all the times I was forced to punish myself. But he doesn't mention them.

"You must have new undergarments, that's for certain," he says. "Yes, yes… I think I know just the thing. Do I have your permission to begin?"

"Let's be clear about this," I say, as he circles me again. He seems distracted, so I say sharply, "Stop staring at me and *listen*."

He refocuses his attention on my face, and I think I see a flicker of heat in his eyes. But the next second he's all pleasant politeness. "I'm listening."

"I take it you're not going to mend the dress I made."

"Certainly not. I'm conjuring you a new one, with new undergarments as well. But the clothing I conjure does expire and disappear eventually. You'll have to leave the ball by midnight and be back here within half an hour after that, or you'll end up quite naked."

I return his grin with a glare. "I'm sure that sounds very funny to you, but it doesn't to me. I've been humiliated quite enough for one lifetime."

He looks repentant. "As long as you heed the warning and leave by midnight, there should be no such humiliation."

"I'm not sure I can persuade my stepsisters to leave so early," I say. "Most balls continue until one or two in the morning. I'll need my own transportation to and from the palace. Can you provide that?"

"As an addendum to your first request? Certainly. I'm nothing if not generous."

There's a twinkle in his eye when he says it, and something in the tenor of his voice sounds downright salacious. A faint flutter courses through my lower belly.

"What are you waiting for?" I snap. "Dress me and provide me with a carriage."

"So demanding," he purrs, gathering a handful of my hair and running it through his fingers. "Ah, now you're thinking of impaling me with that poker. Don't, I beg you—I'm merely gauging the texture of your hair so I can provide a hairstyle to complement the gown. And now—your ensemble for the grand ball."

It happens in the blink of an eye. One moment I'm in threadbare undergarments, and the next I'm dressed in the loveliest blue gown I've ever seen. My hair is pinned half up, and the blond locks draping my bare shoulders feel so silky and soft I can hardly believe they're mine.

"Have a look," murmurs the Faerie, and the air shimmers in front of me, turning solid and reflective like a mirror, until I have a full view of myself, from head to toe.

The bodice of the gown sparkles like it's made of gemstones, yet it's as comfortable as a second skin. The skirt swishes airily

around my legs. My whole body feels refreshed, and my face—I don't know what he did to it, but my natural beauty has been enhanced without a trace of cosmetics. I look radiant and elegant. Like a future queen.

"There now," croons the Faerie. "Some of my best work, I think. Of course I had a lovely subject, which helps."

The compliment resonates through my body, all the more powerful because I never receive any such words of praise. But caution sparks in my mind, too.

"No sweet talk," I tell him.

"Not even one tiny compliment?" He arches a brow.

"Not one."

"Very well." He pouts a little, then his eyes flare wide with shock. "Shoes! I forgot the shoes."

I lift the gown and stretch out my bare toes, but even as I do, a delicate silver slipper forms around my foot.

"Perfect." He drops to one knee, catches my ankle, and lifts my foot to inspect the shoe. But when his fingers close over the anklet, he jerks away with a sharp cry, as if the contact hurt him.

I withdraw a step, letting my skirts fall back into place. The Faerie remains on one knee, stunned alarm in his gaze.

"What is this?" he asks.

I struggle to speak, but my lips won't open. They only press themselves more tightly together, sealed by my stepmother's command.

"I see," he says slowly. "You can't talk about it?"

I shake my head.

"You can't tell me what it does, or who placed it on you?"

Again I shake my head. I can feel tears burning at the back of my eyes, and the last thing I want to do is cry when I'm supposed to be going to a royal ball.

"I need my carriage," I whisper.

"Of course you do." He rises, all his playful humor gone. His eyes have darkened and his features look harder, sharper, more dreadful and wicked.

Instinctively I wrap my hand around my pocket watch, whose silver chain still lies around my neck. I tuck the watch itself into the bodice of the gown, between my breasts.

"If you want to keep wearing that, I'll glamour it to look like a fine necklace," says my Faerie godfather. When I nod, the watch and chain transform instantly into a tiered collar of gemstones flowing from my throat to my breasts. I don't miss the Faerie's lingering glance at my newly adorned cleavage.

But he looks away the next instant and says briskly, "Come along, then! No time to waste."

He leads me outside, and as we emerge into the freezing night, a fluffy white wrap manifests from thin air and folds itself around my shoulders, while a white fur muff appears between my hands. I catch it and tuck my fingers into its warmth. The cold makes me cough, and the Faerie casts a sidelong look at me, frowning slightly. I can't tell if he's annoyed or concerned.

The carriage he conjures is more unearthly than anything he has yet produced. He seems to fabricate it from the air itself—it looks as if it's made of ice, glass, or crystal—maybe all three. Even the four horses pulling it look as if they're made of glass, but he lifts a hand toward them and they turn white. With every swish of their long manes and tails, glittering snowflakes shake loose.

"I have never seen anything so beautiful," I whisper.

"Magic is not inherently good or evil," he says quietly. "It can be used to help or to harm, and I wish you were not so familiar with the latter. But for tonight, think of nothing except enjoying yourself. Dance, drink, and flirt with handsome gentlemen."

That's a privilege I can't afford, though I don't tell him why. I simply turn away and climb into the crystal carriage. The seats inside are draped in white furs, a delight to my weary body.

Without any driver to signal them, the snowy horses begin to move, and the carriage starts to roll away.

But when I lean out the window to thank the Faerie, he has disappeared.

# 5

During the half-hour drive to the city, I have trouble focusing my thoughts. My mind keeps leaping between the tasks I must accomplish. I need to glean some useful information about the prince, something my stepsisters can use to get close to him and set themselves apart from all the other women in attendance. I have to find my way to the library and figure out how to get into the vault. Then I need to spend time with the books in the vault so I can free myself from this fucking anklet.

There's no way I can do all of it tonight. It's simply impossible. But maybe, if I can prove useful to my stepmother, she'll let me return tomorrow night. So my focus must be on devising a scheme to promote my stepsisters in the eyes of the Crown Prince. Vashli and Amisa are both beautiful in different ways, and they both have unfortunate personalities, so I suppose I will have to decide which of them can feign likability the best for His Royal Highness.

When the crystal carriage halts, I realize with a start that I've arrived at the palace. I have a vague memory of the city streets passing by the carriage windows in a dazzle of lighted color, but I don't remember much of it. I was deep in my head, strategizing.

The palace, though, emblazons itself instantly on my brain. It's a huge rectangular structure, more serviceable than decorative, with a large central block flanked by an east and west wing. Rows of windows shine into the night, but the massive pillared entrance is brightest, shedding light over the sweeping steps and crisply trimmed hedges. The lawns are brown now, but I can imagine they must look lovely and lush in the summertime.

Several footmen and guards stand in a motionless row along each side of the wide steps leading to the entrance. When I open the carriage door myself, one of the footmen hurries forward to help me down.

The carriage rolls away along the drive, toward a distant lawn where I can see other carriages parked in rows, but thankfully the footman doesn't seem to notice that I didn't have a driver. He merely says, "Would you like me to escort you inside, my lady?"

I almost laugh at the title. I'm used to being called "Cinders" or "fool" or "wretch."

"Yes, please," I tell him, and he offers his arm, accompanying me up the steps and into the glowing heart of the palace.

I stare in awe at the staggering height of the ceilings and the air of subdued luxury that suffuses the foyer. Statues loom along a marble staircase ahead, and more stonework frames an immense door to my right. In the room beyond, colorful clusters of people are milling about. The strains of a waltz mingle with the chattering din of the crowd.

"Whom shall I tell them to announce?" murmurs the footman as we cross the glossy floor of the foyer, heading for the ballroom. He reaches for my fluffy wrap, and I yield it to him, knowing that even if he hangs it up in some coatroom, it will disappear at midnight.

"Do they have to announce me?" I ask, but when he gives me a confused look, I say, "Announce me as Celinda Laurier of Eisling House, daughter of Anvedin Laurier."

My father wasn't a nobleman, but he did well for himself as the owner of many merchant ships and a couple shipyards. He used to say my birth gave Fate a reason to smile on him, for it was then that his fortunes began to improve and he was able to expand his

business and amass the wealth that has kept Eisling House afloat thus far. His name still carries some weight in the social circles of this region, though mine is fairly unknown. I'm rarely introduced to anyone, and when my step-family does acknowledge me in public, they simply call me "Cinders" or "the maid."

The kind footman passes on my request to the herald at the door, who blows his trumpet to signal my arrival. The soft waltz continues in the background even as he bawls out my introduction.

It's terrifying to enter that room, to face all those eyes. I'm used to doing my work quietly, unnoticed. The most attention I ever get is on market day, and even then I'm on a strict schedule from Gilda and I'm not allowed to engage in much conversation. The onslaught of so many people, so much attention at once—it's a torture I didn't expect.

But I hold my head high and sail into the room in my glorious dress, taking comfort in the fact that even if I'm anxious, at least I look beautiful. My Faerie godfather did his work well. Though my gown is a different style than most, it suits me perfectly. With its graceful silhouette and exquisite material, it outshines every other garment at this gathering.

I spot the Prince immediately, as his portrait usually appears next to his father's in public buildings. He's pleasantly handsome, dressed in a cream-colored suit with red and gold trim. A thin circlet of gold nestles amid the waves of his brown hair.

He's dancing with a young lady, but when the herald announces me, he turns his head and catches my gaze. My heart does a quick flip at the eye contact, and my first instinct is to look away—but I'm here to help my stepsisters ensnare him, and to do that, I need to make a good impression.

So I hold his gaze, and I let a soft smile curve my lips. The blush on my cheeks is real, engendered by my nerves and by the constant awareness of what's at stake.

The Prince smiles back. He leans toward his companion and murmurs something, at which she looks somewhat disgruntled. Then he leaves her and walks toward me as the crowd parts for him.

The fluttering sensation in my chest intensifies. Surely he can't be coming over to ask me to dance. Surely it can't be this easy. Surely there are lovelier, more graceful people with whom he could spend his time.

I've seen people dance. I've watched waltzes from shadowed doorways and observed merry jigs in the market square. I've danced around the kitchen before. But dancing with the Crown Prince, in front of everyone? Terror floods my limbs, turning them weak.

The Prince is in front of me now. He's about my height, and as I look into his eyes, I see sincere admiration. His warm, easy smile takes a little of the edge off my nerves.

By some miracle, I remember to sink into a deep curtsy.

"Good evening," he says, with a slight bow. "Miss Laurier, is it?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Call me Brantley. Would you care to dance?"

I'm excruciatingly conscious of everyone in the room looking at us, listening to our conversation. He seems relaxed, but in this moment I realize how difficult it must be for him, having his every move watched, his every sentence dissected and evaluated.

"I'm not the best of dancers, Your Highness," I reply. "But with your guidance, I'd be willing to try."

"That's more than fair." He extends his hand, and I take it.

He leads me to the center of the immense ballroom, where we join a few dozen other couples. Apparently the Prince also invited many eligible young men to be present tonight, to provide dance partners for the ladies while he is occupied.

Even though everyone here is dressed in their finest, I can spot those with true wealth and dignity. There's a simplicity and quality to their clothing, whereas those with less money or no titles tend to make themselves garishly noticeable, as if a preponderance of gaudy trimmings or bright colors will make up for their lack of breeding or wealth.

To my mind, noble blood means little, but the education and manners that accompany it do have some value. Since my father's passing, my education has consisted of whatever scraps I could learn on my own in the precious minutes when I wasn't immersed in

household chores. Nor do I possess the flawless manners of high society. But my dress and my necklace proclaim me as someone of both class and means, and I hope I can fake the rest, just for one night.

The Prince leads the dance well, and I quickly assimilate to the rhythm and the simple paces.

"So many beautiful ladies here tonight," he says. "And yet I do believe you are the most stunning."

"Thank you," I reply. "But you must not have met my sisters yet. They are both quite lovely and have many charming qualities."

"Indeed? And what might those qualities be?"

"Well, Amisa is… she likes to…" *Oh fuck*. Here's my opportunity to begin earning them favor with the Prince, and my mind has gone entirely blank. "And Vashli, she's quite… um…"

For fuck's sake, there must be *something* good about them.

The Prince's smile has faded, and he's looking at me quizzically.

"Forgive me," I say with a breathless laugh. "I suppose I'm a bit flustered, being in your presence."

He chuckles. "Not to worry, Miss Laurier. Perhaps we should see if we share any interests. Do you like music? I'm quite fond of this song. The rhythm is so crisp, so satisfying. Are you familiar with the work of the composer Eshlin Asok?"

"I can't say that I am," I admit.

"I'm fascinated with his work." And with that, the Prince launches into a lengthy biography of the composer, including the history of the school of music where he trained, a list of which musicians he prefers to work with, and a ranking of his best songs, along with the inspiration for each one.

Another partner might find the Prince dull, but for someone like me, who yearns for knowledge she has no time to gain, his lecture is both informative and interesting. I let him talk for as long as he likes without changing the subject or cutting in, except to ask a few questions related to the topic.

But eventually, my interest wears thin and my attention begins to wander. We've danced through several more songs and my feet

are beginning to hurt. I'm itching to slip away, to talk with some of the palace servants and find out where the library is.

The time hasn't been wasted though. I've deepened my knowledge of music, and I've discovered a few important things about the Crown Prince.

First, he's obsessed with the composer Eshlin Asok. Second, he's a man with a love of specifics, who enjoys diving deeply into one subject and learning everything about it. And third—he seems to enjoy a partner who will listen to him with genuine interest.

As the waltz ends and he pauses for breath, I gently intercept before he can continue speaking. "Your Highness, I have preyed upon your kindness long enough. As delightful as our conversation has been, there are many young ladies here who desire a moment of your time, and I must share you with them."

He looks lost for a moment, and so sincerely disappointed that I impulsively clasp his hands in mine. It's too intimate a gesture for such a short acquaintance, but I can't help it. He seems sad, and I know what it is to need comfort.

I feel a little guilty that, without trying to, I somehow made him like me enough to dance with me for a significant portion of the night. But it will all work out. It's part of the plan. Securing his attention was the first step, and now I can redirect that attention from myself to Amisa or Vashli.

"Will you walk with me in the garden later?" he asks. "There are some lovely winter roses. I can tell you all about the horticulturist who cultivated the species—it's a fascinating tale."

"I'm sure it is." I press his hands between mine. "I will try to see you again before midnight. Until then…" I hesitate, thanking Fate because at that moment, I spot Vashli not far away in the crowd, dancing with a rather bland-looking young man and watching me with undisguised jealousy. "Until then, you should dance with my sister Vashli."

I lead the Prince toward her. At our approach, her envious expression transforms into momentary astonishment before she manages to plaster a simpering smile on her face.

"Vashli, may I introduce His Royal Highness," I say. "Your Highness, this is Miss Vashli Laurier."

"Call me Brantley," the Prince says affably.

"The Prince enjoys winter roses and the compositions of Eshlin Asok," I say, with a significant look at Vashli. She only stares at me, uncomprehending, and frustration spikes in my chest. *Motherfuck*— "If you'll excuse us for a moment," I say to the Prince with a smile.

Pulling Vashli a few steps away, I speak sharply in her ear. "Ask him to tell you the history of the winter roses. Feign interest if you have to. Smile. Ask intelligent questions."

"Don't tell me what to do, cunt-wipe," she hisses. "And where did you get that dress?"

"Go back to him before he chooses someone else."

With a murderous glare, she turns away and glides toward Brantley. I bob a curtsy to him and then hurry in the opposite direction, threading my way through the crowd and pretending I don't notice the calls and outstretched hands of several young men asking me to dance.

I escape into the foyer and flee deeper into the palace, through a huge dining room and a dimly lit smoking room, then into a portrait gallery. I pass the occasional guard, footman, or servant, but none of them stop me. A few other visitors are walking in the same areas, admiring the collectibles and art. Apparently the Prince's guests are allowed to wander through parts of the main floor tonight.

When I spot a trio of guards engaged in low conversation, I meander past them slowly, my ears attuned to their conversation.

"The King did not come to the ball," mutters one of them.

"I heard he wasn't feeling well at the council meeting this afternoon," replies another guard. "He must be resting."

"Perhaps, or he gave his bodyguards the slip again and went out into the city."

"Ren and Sevir hate it when he does that." The second guard chuckles.

"I would, too. It's their job to protect him, but he makes it difficult."

"He's about due for another dalliance with some gorgeous young mistress," the third guard comments. "Perhaps he's on the hunt for one now."

Their voices fade behind me, since I can't linger any longer without them suspecting me of eavesdropping. Hesitantly I approach a maid who is dusting one of the portraits.

"I was just dancing with His Royal Highness, and he mentioned a biography of Eshlin Asok," I say. "I'm a great lover of books and music, so I thought I might do a little reading before I meet him in the garden later. But this place is so big—I can't remember which way he told me to go to find the library."

Her eyes light up with interest. With a few strategic sentences and key details, I've established myself in her mind as a favorite of the Prince. No doubt she will spread gossip to that effect, which could allow me a bit more freedom in the palace.

"Of course, love." She leads me to the open door at the end of the gallery. "You want to turn right here, go to the next hall, and take a left. The library is through the big doors on the right side, with the dragons engraved on them. You can't miss it."

"Thank you." My heart pounds faster as I hurry away, following her guidance.

Though I didn't have access to a full education, I can read quickly *and* retain the information—skills that will serve me well once I find the books I'm looking for. Being so close to the resources I need is a thrilling accomplishment. I can nearly taste freedom.

I pause before a pair of gigantic doors, each boasting two intertwined dragons carved from the gleaming black wood. One of them is already ajar. If I weren't wearing such a decadent gown, I could slip through easily. As it is, I have to push the door a bit wider to enter. Its hinges groan faintly, and the sound echoes in the space beyond.

Cautiously I creep in, my heart thumping in my throat, my eyes wide with worshipful awe.

The library is a dark cavern of books, uplit by the soft glow of frosted electric bulbs. To my left, pale moonlight shines in from the garden through a pair of arched windows. The glow touches the

curled white petals of winter roses, two huge bouquets of them overflowing from large urns.

I tear my gaze away from the moonlight and the flowers, refocusing on the layout of the library, a rectangular room divided by rows of bookshelves. Along the wall behind the bookshelves I glimpse alcoves with cushioned benches—nooks where readers might find refuge.

I move deeper into the room, looking for another door that might conceal a vault of prized books. But parts of the library are heavily shadowed, and there's so much tall furniture it's difficult to get good sightlines. I'll have to do a thorough exploration of every nook and cranny, even the alcoves and the darkened areas.

All the dancing has made my lungs ache, and I'm finding it difficult to get a deep breath. I pause and bend over, sucking in air until I finally get a whole breath, all the way to the bottom of my lungs. It's an inexpressible relief.

I have *got* to quit sleeping next to a coal bin.

I walk between two rows of bookshelves toward the far wall, the one with all the reading nooks. Each nook has a light set within it, overhanging the bench seat. In some alcoves, the light is on, even though no one is reading there. It seems like a waste of electrical power. At Eisling House, we use electricity sparingly.

But it's none of my business whether the palace wastes money or not. I simply need to find the vault.

"Where are you?" I mutter, pacing down the aisle, swishing aside the curtain of a reading nook. A cursory inspection shows no sign of a concealed door, so I move on to the next alcove, whose light is on, with the curtain partly drawn.

I see the boots a second too late, as I'm already drawing back the curtain. Black leather boots, finely crafted, crossed at the ankles. Not a speck of mud on them. The boots belong to a man who's reclining in the alcove with his feet up, reading a book.

"I beg your pardon," I gasp. "I didn't know anyone was here."

The man smiles at me. He's not young, but he's undeniably handsome, with black brows, ice-gray eyes, and a mane of wavy silver hair. His square chin and angular jaw frame the most perfect

mouth I've ever seen—exquisite lips crafted for kissing, surrounded by a short scruff of dark beard, neatly trimmed. His clothes aren't overtly luxurious—a simple pair of black pants and a loose white shirt that shows part of his well-cut chest. There's a warm elegance and a regal charm about him that doesn't come through in his portraits, making him even more appealing in person.

This is the King himself. I just yanked back the curtain and disturbed the King's private reading session.

"Your Majesty," I exclaim, dropping into a curtsy.

He dismisses the formality with a wave of his hand. "No need for all that." His voice has a deep, soothing resonance. I notice his fingers—thick, masculine, adorned with heavy rings. "Who are you looking for?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Earlier, you said, 'Where are you?' Are you searching for someone?"

"Oh… not exactly. I… well… I was looking for a book." My gaze descends to the volume lying open on his lap. One page contains text, and the opposite page features a detailed drawing of a naked man fucking a nude woman against a tree.

Swallowing hard, I glance at the King, who makes no move to hide the image or close the book. His silver eyes narrow, crinkling at the corners as he gives me an amused smile.

"Ever read a book like this?" he asks.

A wicked heat rushes through my body, and in a moment of impulsive daring, I decide to tell him the truth. "A woman of good breeding should say no, but… yes."

His smile broadens. "I respect your honesty."

"I should say, I've only read short stories of that kind," I confess. "Never an entire book."

"Ah. Well, the story is good. It's meant to titillate, of course, but there's substance beyond that."

Another wave of hot embarrassment rolls over me, because not only did I disturb His Royal Majesty, the King of all the land, but I'm standing here, talking about naughty books, hearing him say words like "titillate" with that sinfully exquisite mouth of his.

It crosses my mind that he's exempt from the command my stepmother placed on me, when she forbade me to have sex with any of the young men of the region. He's old enough to be my father, outside the category of "young men." And yet he's more beautiful than any man I've ever seen, except perhaps my Faerie godfather.

The King's eyes are wandering over my body with bold interest. His broad, smooth lips part, and he fucking *licks* them, as if I'm a treat he'd like to taste.

And why shouldn't he? Earlier, when the Faerie kissed me, I was re-awakened to the carnal needs of my body. I even thought about satisfying those needs tonight. Why not quench my sexual thirst with the King himself?

Besides, as the owner of this palace and ruler of the kingdom, he would be the one person who could grant me access to the vault where all the books on Faerie magic are kept. I could defy my stepmother, sate my own cravings, and get closer to my goals at the same time. All I have to do is seduce the King.

Judging by the bulge in his trousers, it won't be difficult.

# 6

I relax my body a little and twirl a lock of hair around my finger. I've never seduced anyone before, but I've read about it, and I've watched other people flirt and fawn over each other.

"Do you read books like that often?" I ask.

"Sometimes," he replies. "When I lack companionship."

"I would think that a king could have *companionship* anytime he desires it."

"I could have companions," he says, never taking his eyes from mine. "But I happen to be rather particular about that sort of company."

"Are you?" I'm blushing hot at my own boldness, feeling wicked and brave and frightened all at the same time. "What kind of person meets the standards of the King?"

Slowly he closes the book. Lays it down. Rises to his full height. He's taller than his son—taller than me. He isn't smiling now, and there's a wolfish gleam in those silver eyes.

"It's not something I can define," he says. "I know it when I see it."

"Do you?" I squeak. Damn my voice for breaking, and damn my stupid nerves. I want to be sultry and winsome, not girlishly terrified. I'm twenty-six, for Fate's sake. I should have had this experience by now. I should be married, with my own family, far beyond my stepmother's grip.

But she will never let me live a normal life. She will never let me go. All I can do is seize moments of freedom when I'm given the chance. And a moment like this may never come again. I can scarcely believe this is happening—that the King is standing before me with hunger in his eyes. The tension is thickening between us, thrumming with sensuous promise until I can hardly breathe.

The King is a good man, from what I've heard. A decent ruler who tries to be honest and fair to his people. There are struggles in our kingdom, as with any nation, but he has always been generous with the poor. The worst thing I've heard about him is that ever since his wife died, many years ago, he overindulges his fondness for beautiful women and hasn't seen fit to marry any of them. That lecherous nature of his could play in my favor tonight.

"Have you seen our winter roses?" asks the King, his voice deeper than ever. "They are something of a specialty here at the palace. A point of pride with our gardeners."

"I saw some," I reply. "By the windows, when I came in. They were… drenched in moonlight."

Fuck, that sounded stupid.

"Drenched?" he repeats, and my body trembles. Forget the roses—*I'm* drenched, soaking through the delicate panties my Faerie godfather conjured for me.

"Come with me," says the King. "You can take a closer look at the roses."

I'd rather take a closer look at *him*, but I follow obediently. We pause in front of the windows, both of us staring at the lush bouquets in the two matching urns.

"They're beautiful," I say, and he echoes, "Yes, indeed. Quite beautiful." But his voice is closer, and his face is turned toward me, not the flowers.

He wants me, and he's waiting for me to indicate whether I want him or not. But I've never done this before. I don't know what to do or say.

He said he respects honesty. Perhaps I should tell him, plainly and clearly, what I want.

I move toward him and reach out, laying my fingers lightly along his waist. He smells rich—I don't know how else to express it. His fragrance speaks of luxury, of wealth, of power.

Tipping my face up to his, I voice my request in the softest of whispers. "Will you fuck me?"

His eyes widen, moonlight filling their gray depths. "Aren't you here for the ball? For the Prince?"

"I came here for your son, yes," I murmur. "But now I'd like to come for you… Your Majesty."

It's yet another daring declaration, far too risky, far too bold, and yet he seems to like it. A sound reverberates in his chest, a low rumble of satisfaction. His warm hand spreads across the small of my back, then slides all the way up my spine until he's cupping my neck. Instinctively I sway into him, my body seeking the support of his.

With his free hand he plucks out the jeweled comb that was holding my hair halfway up. He flings the comb aside, and my hair tumbles free.

His hand flexes at my nape, and I relax into the grip, letting my head fall back and exposing my throat to him. I think I might die if he doesn't kiss me right there, right over my pulse point, with that perfect mouth.

He's breathing hard. I can feel the intensity of his stare, the urgency of his body, the bulge of his cock pressing against my stomach. He wants me desperately. And yet he hesitates.

"Are you doing this because you want to fuck a king?" he asks.

"No!" I lift my head, facing him. We're so close my lips graze his when I speak, and the contact sends a trembling rush through my veins. "No," I say, more softly, my breath ghosting over his mouth. "I don't care who you are. This is simply a moment in time between strangers. I've been wretchedly miserable and this whole night is a

dream, a beautiful one. It has given me hope when I thought all was hopeless. And your touch—the pleasure and freedom we could enjoy together—it's something I need. Something I would beg you for, if my pride would allow it."

"You don't care who I am," he repeats, as if to confirm it. "A different face, a different body would do just as well for you?"

He's asking if I would fuck him if he wasn't a king, if I would fuck anyone right now, just to find the release I crave. Again, I choose honesty. "Yes. Maybe that's wrong…"

"No," he says quickly, vehemently. "No, it's right. Let this be a dream between us."

His fingers slide over my breast, pulling down the edge of the bodice. I suck in a breath as cool air caresses my exposed skin. As my nipple tightens with the chill, he puts out his tongue and licks it.

The sensation sends me into a heady spiral, a gasp breaking from my lips. At the sound, he reacts with violent urgency, dragging down the bodice of the gown until both my breasts are exposed. I stand on quivering legs, clasping his shoulders while he mouths each breast in turn.

No man has ever touched me like this. I've never experienced anything so wonderful.

The King releases my nipple from his beautiful mouth, then picks me up, gown and all, and carries me over to a long couch in a shadowed corner. After draping my body on it, he undoes the rest of the buttons on his shirt, baring his muscular upper body. His chest is lightly cloaked with curling silver hair, and when he climbs onto the couch with me, I run greedy fingers over the expanse of him, drinking in every new texture.

*This* is how a man's skin feels. Hot and smooth, soft in places, yet with hard muscle rippling under the skin. He lets me explore him for a moment while his body hovers over mine on the couch. Then he's shoving my dress up, out of his way. He grasps my panties and pulls them off… but before tossing them aside, he bunches them under his nose and inhales the scent, his eyes closing blissfully.

I have no idea if that's normal male behavior, but I love the raw, primal urgency of it, just like I love the way he throws my legs apart

and plunges his face between them. He does it so quickly that I have no time to be self-conscious before I'm feeling him there, with the scruff of his beard grazing my inner thighs, tantalizing every sensitive bit of me.

I want to scream. It's too much, yet it's not enough—and his tongue—fuck, his *tongue*. Sharp little breaths shatter from my lips, until I'm so sensitive that I must scream or I will die. I bite the back of my wrist while the King drives his tongue through my folds, over and over, ending each stroke with a delicate little swirl over my clit.

Then his tongue is dancing, dancing, pattering against my clit and I'm sobbing, biting deeper into my wrist as I try not to scream. *Fuck, fuck, fuck—*

I'm flying, streaking high into the sky like a star with a tail of fire. I'm coming, coming in hard spasms against his mouth, and my lips are open but I can't make a sound. He presses the flat of his tongue over my sex while I writhe in mute ecstasy.

I manage to breathe at last. Huge shuddering gasps of pleasure burst from my lungs.

The King smiles and wipes his mouth with his hand. He's withdrawing from me, as if we're done.

Fuck no. I'm so far from being done with him. When I have the chance to pleasure myself, I can usually come three times, and I'm greedy enough to want another climax. This will be the night that I lose my virginity on my own terms. It's one way I can claim ownership of my body and steal something from my stepmother that was never hers to begin with.

I reach for the King, violence in my voice. "This isn't finished."

"Thank Fate," he groans with a hoarse laugh. He opens his pants and pushes them down just enough to reveal a very fine ass and a long, erect cock.

I'm suddenly conscious of how wide my legs are spread, even as the library door stands partly open. We're in a dark corner, but someone could still enter and observe us. What would the Prince think of me fucking his father after we danced together for so long?

The idea of hurting the Prince unsettles me a bit. But this isn't about some man I barely know. It's about me. My choice. My power

over my own body.

The King grips my thigh, pushes my leg up. With his other hand he strokes the tip of his cock through my pussy, slathering himself in my wetness. “Drenched,” he murmurs with a sly grin.

I don’t return the smile. I’m tense, gripping the back of the sofa and the cushions, waiting for his invasion.

It’s just sex, a cock in a hole. Simple enough. And I want this. So why am I suddenly fearful?

He’s poised at my entrance. I can feel the head of his cock there, blunt and warm, nosing in a little. But he pulls back, silver eyes keen with perception. “You’re afraid.”

I shake my head.

“Don’t deny it. I can smell your fear.”

I quirk an eyebrow at him, and he chuckles. “Just an expression. I’ve been in this role for a long time, and I know when someone is afraid. As much as I want to plunge into that sweet, soaked little cunt and lose myself inside you, I will stop if you say the word. I won’t touch you again.”

His words are gratifying, and somehow they’re just what I needed to hear. “I’m not afraid of *you*. Just of *this*, a little.”

“Of this… because you haven’t done this before?” he asks.

I nod. “But I want to. I need it.” My pussy is quivering, sensitized, aching for fullness. “Please—take me. But gently, until I ask for more.”

“Like this?” He dips inside me a little, then withdraws. His hand splays on my lower stomach, his thumb tracing lazy circles over and around my clit.

“More,” I whisper.

He pokes his cock back through my entrance, then pulls out. Again and again he dips inside me, a little deeper each time, while his thumb massages my clit. The slippery sensation of his thick cock moving in and out, taunting me, is quickly becoming too much to bear.

“More,” I say in a sharp whisper, and he eases deeper with infuriating slowness.

Suddenly there's a stretching sensation, and I tense. He pauses, pinching my clit lightly and then rubbing his hand across it with a rapid rhythm that sends me into an instant frenzy.

"Oh gods," I whisper frantically. "Oh yes—more, please, more!"

He pushes in deeper, a wolfish grin on his face. But the moment he's fully seated inside me, his expression changes from teasing mischief to reverent bliss. "You have such a perfect little cunt," he breathes. "I've never felt one this good. Fuck…" He stares down at where we're joined, color flushing his cheeks, his face awash with wonder.

I won't lie—it's deeply gratifying to have a King say you're the best he's ever had. Especially when he starts fucking you like he's gone mad, like he's possessed, like you're all he has ever wanted and all he needs.

That's how the King takes me. I feared it might hurt, but after that initial burst of pain, it doesn't. He's braced over me, his silver hair swaying, his handsome face taut with impending pleasure, his toned body flexing as he fucks me. Every thrust feels like a link broken in the chains that bind my soul, and every grunt of ecstasy from him is music. Every shift of my body beneath the force of his passion is my door to freedom being pushed open wider.

This is defiance. This is liberty. This is hope. And I come for the King again, with the thrill of freedom blazing through my limbs like a meteor shower.

"That's a good fucking girl, coming for your King," he says hoarsely. "Do you want me to come inside you?"

The wickedness of it thrills me—the idea that the ruler of this kingdom is going to spend himself deep in my body, that I'll return to Eisling House with his cum inside my womb, and my stepmother will never know.

"There are herbs I can take later," I tell him. "Yes, you can come inside me. Please come inside me."

He comes with a heavy groan, thrusting deep, pumping every bit of his release into my pussy. I hold him while he finishes, the two of us wreathed together by pleasure and passion.

After a moment, his breathing slows and his eyes open. He doesn't kiss me, but his gaze locks with mine, and we stare at each other, panting. A slow smile spreads over my face, and he grins back.

And then the library clock strikes the hour.

But which hour? Panic flares through my chest as I realize I haven't been tracking time like I should.

"What time is it?" I gasp.

The King glances over his shoulder. "Midnight."

"Oh shit." I separate myself from him and tumble off the sofa. One of my slippers came off while we were fucking, but I find it and slip my foot inside. I have no idea where my panties are. They're the least of my worries. "I have to go. Thank you for… Thank you."

"Wait!" He's tucking himself in, fastening his pants. "You haven't told me your name, or where I can find you."

Warmth spreads through my heart at the thought that he wants to see me again. I'm almost out the door of the library, but I call back, "I'll try to meet you here tomorrow!"

Without waiting for his reply, I run.

I flee the palace, hoping that somehow I'll be able to find my carriage among all the others on the lawn—but to my shock, it's already waiting for me at the bottom of the steps. I race toward it, fling myself inside, and shut the door. With a shake of their snowy manes, the horses set off at a quick pace.

The glamour wears off my pocket watch on the way back, and I nervously track the time until we arrive at Eisling House with two minutes to spare. The carriage vanishes the moment I exit, transforming into a cloud of sugared snow and glittering blue dust. My slippers vanish as I run up the front steps, and I barely have time to descend into the cellar before my dress disappears. No doubt my panties vanished from the floor of the royal library as well.

Coughing from the exertion and the cold air, I pull on a threadbare nightgown and hurry back upstairs. No one else has returned yet, and I need to raid my stepmother's stash of herbal pellets. Her sex life is infrequent, and as a woman in her early forties

she is nearly past childbearing age, but she keeps the contraceptives on hand as a preventative measure, and I'm glad of it.

The last thing I need is to become pregnant with the bastard child of the King.

I take one of the herb pellets from the little case on her dressing table and return downstairs. As I enter the kitchen, a light voice drawls, "Well, well, well. Looks like someone had a little too much fun tonight."

# 7

My Faerie godfather is lounging against the wall, dressed in a sparkling suit.

"Do you ever wear anything but purple?" I ask, still chewing the herbs.

"It's my favorite color. What are you eating?"

"None of your damn business."

"You were very nearly late tonight. I assume the ball was everything you dreamed it would be?"

I hesitate, feeling suddenly exposed in the thin nightdress. I'm wearing nothing beneath it, and I can still feel a faint stickiness on my inner thighs and a delicious kind of soreness between my legs.

"It was exactly what I needed," I reply.

His nostrils flare slightly, and his lips curve in a smirk. "You fucked someone."

"For Fate's sake, shut up!" I glance nervously at the door, as if my stepmother might appear at any minute. "You don't know that."

"I can smell it."

"You can *smell* it?" I repeat, aghast.

"I can't imagine His Royal Highness slept with you, so who had the privilege of nestling between those lovely thighs of yours? Oh wait—I forgot. No compliments." He presses two ringed fingers to his mouth as if to shush himself.

"My sexual activities have nothing to do with you," I say sharply.

His eyes narrow and his smile vanishes. "Your wellbeing is my only goal here."

"Then you'll grant me another request. I'm fairly sure my stepmother will allow me to attend the second ball tomorrow evening. I'll need a dress and transportation. Can you make the gown last longer this time?"

He sulks a little. "If I were a full-blooded Fae, yes. But I have human blood from my mother's side, and even though she was god-touched, it lessens the duration of the things I conjure."

"That's a pity." I tug contemplatively at my lower lip, and his gaze drops to my mouth with undisguised interest. "Stop looking at me like that."

He flushes and glances away. "If I were allowed to compliment you, I'd say you have a pretty mouth. It's rather distracting."

"Every time you break the rules and give me a compliment, you owe me another favor," I say.

"A businesswoman at heart, aren't you? Fine, I'll agree to that bargain. Let's seal it with a kiss."

"Must we?" I grimace.

He draws back, pressing his hand dramatically to his heart. "What did I do to inspire such revulsion? Was my kiss really so terrible?"

I'm not about to admit I enjoyed it, so I shrug. "I've had better."

"We both know you have not." He paces toward me slowly, his eyes pools of lavender light, glittering with purpose. I find myself retreating, my heartbeat high and quick.

"Stop backing away," he purrs. "We need to seal the bargain."

He seems prone to compliment me, and I need the favors from him. It's a good deal, with a playfulness to it that I've never had with anyone. I'm not sure why I'm scared to let him touch me again. Maybe because I suspect how my body will respond, and I'm not

ready to face the fact that I might be deeply attracted to two different men, neither of whom can give me the future I want.

My back hits the wall, and I shiver as the Faerie approaches. He smells delicately floral, like violets and warm spring air.

He bends his head, his breath lightly fanning my lips, but he doesn't kiss me. He hovers there, one palm against the wall near my head, his chest nearly brushing mine.

"I like this," he whispers. "The moment before the kiss. The suspended desire, the tension. It's something to be savored, don't you think?"

"Just fucking do it," I whisper back.

With a soft smirk, he moves in, closing his lips gently over mine. The tip of his tongue nudges between my lips, and I greet it with mine, a brief exchange of wetness.

This kiss isn't like the first one. It's tentative, chaste, almost fragile. He pulls back, and for a second he's glowing all over—white skin shining like snow under the moon, purple hair sparkling like jewels. But I must have imagined it, because when I blink, the glow is gone.

And so is he.

Just as well, because I hear the noise of my stepfamily coming back from the ball. They must have left the city center shortly after I did.

As I hurry to remove their shoes and help with their wraps, I notice that Gilda looks angrier than usual. The moment I take off her shoes, she grabs my chin and jerks my face up so she can look in my eyes.

"I thought you weren't attending the ball tonight." Her breath is hot, bitter with alcohol. "Yet the girls tell me you were there, in a beautiful gown. Where did you get it? How did you get to the palace and back? Tell the truth."

I can share some truth without telling her everything. "I borrowed the carriage and the gown from an old family friend," I explain. "I had to return them, but they said I could borrow another dress tomorrow if I need it."

My stepmother's eyes turn keen with interest, and I tremble because I know she's going to press me on the subject and ask more questions about the "family friend," and I'm not sure how I'll dodge the inquiries.

But I'm saved by Amisa's petulant interjection. "Family friend?" she scoffs. "Who would want to be friends with you, Cinders? You're so ugly and selfish. Your head looks like a potato."

I can't help smiling at the juvenile quality of the insults. Amisa has never been good at bullying me. Her attempts usually cause me more amusement than harm.

"She's laughing at me, Mother!" squeaks Amisa indignantly. "Make her stop!"

"Shut up." Vashli elbows her. "You're just jealous because Cinders gave the Prince to me, not you."

My stepmother is still gripping my jaw, but her fingers relax a little. "Vashli said you gave her topics of conversation for her time with the Prince, and that you introduced the two of them."

"I did."

"She also said the Prince seemed enamored with *you* for the first part of the evening."

"I got close to him, as we discussed," I reply. "And then I directed his attention to Vashli."

"I liked him," says Vashli. "He knows so much about everything."

The genuine enthusiasm in her tone makes me glance her way in surprise. Her cheeks are pink, and when she catches my gaze, she looks away, blushing deeper.

"I never got to dance with him," complains Amisa. "Mother, make Cinders introduce *me* to the Prince tomorrow night. It's not fair that Vashli got a turn when I didn't. She always gets everything. She's your favorite, isn't she? I always knew it! You both think I'm stupid, that I'm not capable of anything, but it's only because I'm never given a *chance*!"

She bursts into theatrical sobs and runs away upstairs.

My stepmother sighs and releases me. "What else did you learn?"

"The King wasn't feeling well this afternoon," I tell her. "Apparently he likes to give his bodyguards the slip and wander about on his own. I suppose he's eager for the freedom he'll have after he yields the crown to his son. He's giving the Prince free reign with the choice of his wife, so we don't have to worry about much interference on his part yet, although I assume he'll want to meet Prince Brantley's chosen bride before the engagement is announced."

Gilda nods, tapping her lips with her finger.

Vashli is still lingering in the foyer, her plump fingers clasped nervously together. "I had such a good time with the Prince, Mother. He's not at all what I expected. He's such a fascinating—"

"Go upstairs and take your hair down," orders Gilda. "Cinders, help the girls get ready for bed. No need to assist me tonight, just go to bed when you're done and get some rest. I've decided you'll attend the ball tomorrow night as well, provided you can secure the Prince's attention for Amisa this time."

Vashli casts a shocked, despairing look at her mother. At first I think she might argue, but where Amisa overreacts loudly to everything, Vashli tends to keep her feelings inside. After a second's hesitation, she continues upstairs.

"Wouldn't Vashli be a better choice to secure the Prince's affection?" I say quietly. "Amisa is quite volatile, but Vashli—"

"Did I ask for your opinion?" snaps Gilda. "Obey me at once. Get the girls ready for bed."

I know what her strategy is. She's thinking that Amisa, despite her tantrums, will be easier to control. Amisa doesn't think for herself. She obeys without asking why, whereas Vashli, if she's emotionally invested in the Prince, might question and resist Gilda's future plans.

I don't care which sister gets the Prince. I must pursue my own interests and secure my future.

When I've finished helping my stepsisters prepare for bed, I pass by my stepmother's room. Her light is still on. Doubtless she's in there pacing and scheming. In that way, I suppose, she and I aren't so different.

The next day is a flurry of activity. I have to help two grown women clean their teeth, scrub their skin until it glows, condition their hair with Madam Lentula's Hydrating Hair Mask, wax their bodies, trim their nails, and countless other little tasks, not to mention preparing brunch and an early dinner, keeping the house spotless, and ensuring that the gowns for tonight have been steamed or fluffed appropriately. Then there's the care of the animals, who are far less picky and demanding than their human counterparts.

The hours pass quickly, and by the time my stepmother and the sisters are flouncing out the door to their carriage, I'm exhausted. There's no talk of me accompanying them—they all assume that I'll fend for myself, as I did last night. I think Vashli hopes I'll be very late so she has a chance to seize the Prince's attention before I direct him to Amisa.

My stepmother seems rather distracted—she has been invited to another soiree, and I would guess the ladies she's planning to see share her propensity for games of dice and cards. I'm sure she'll do her best to worsen our financial situation this evening.

If I can escape her—escape this city—none of that will be my problem anymore. It will break my heart to leave Eisling House and the animals, but I can't let my affection for them hold me back from regaining my free will.

Even if my stepmother lets me live once the anklet is off, I can't trust her not to regret her mercy. With the Crown Prince in the palm of her hand, she'll be able to send men after me anytime. The moment the anklet leaves my leg, I must run far, far away.

After my step-family leaves, I sink to the floor with my back against the front door, utterly worn out from doing the work of three ladies' maids, a housemaid, a cook, and a farmhand all by myself, all in one day.

My head tilts back against the door and my eyes close. I don't realize I've dozed off until a delicious smell wafts under my nose—warm bread, cinnamon sugar, and vanilla.

I blink and rub my sore neck, conscious that I was dozing with my head at a very uncomfortable angle.

Before me crouches my Faerie godfather, holding a small plate. On it rests a decadent cinnamon roll, drizzled in vanilla icing.

"You're tired," he says sympathetically. "Eat this. It will help."

I eye him suspiciously. "I've heard horrible tales of Faerie food."

"This is my father's recipe, with a twist of my own. It will heal you and give you energy."

"*How* does it heal?" I ask. "Is it like what you did with the cow?"

He winces. "Not exactly. To heal a human, a Faerie must contribute certain—physical essences."

"Such as?"

He sighs. "Can't you simply eat it? Do you *have* to ask how it works?"

"Yes, I do, because judging by the look on your face, I'm not going to like the answer, and I would prefer to know what I'm consuming."

"Fine. Physical essences include blood, tears, saliva, sweat, piss, and cum. Full-blooded Fae don't typically sweat, so that one is difficult to obtain. Usually it takes three of those vital essences from a Fae to achieve a healing effect on a human, but my case is unique. None of my essences provide healing, except one. That essence, when consumed, has a powerful restorative effect."

"Which essence?"

He clears his throat and glances at the creamy white icing drizzled on the cinnamon roll.

"Oh my gods… are you saying what I *think* you're saying? That your *cum* is in that icing?"

The look on his face answers the question for me.

"Fucking hell!" I leap up and walk away from him, toward the kitchen.

He follows, carrying the plate. "It will taste delicious, I promise. You won't notice a thing. Your weariness will disappear and you'll have energy for tonight."

"You're disgusting."

"I'm worried about you."

His words jolt through my heart like a searing arrow. I spin around to face him, but I don't have words to express what I'm

feeling. No one has ever worried about me. Not since my father died.

I've been working myself too hard, and it has caught up with me. My bones ache, my muscles feel liquid, and all I want to do is sleep for twelve hours. Yet I'm supposed to go to the palace and dance. I *have* to go, because I must speak with the Prince again, and I must get into the library vault. There's so much riding on this night, and I simply don't have the strength to see it through.

My gaze drops to the cinnamon roll. "You said I won't notice a difference?"

"I swear it. I taste like vanilla icing. Unless it's a full moon, and then there's a distinct peppermint flavor—"

"I don't want to know any of that." Steeling myself, I pick up the cinnamon roll. "It's just vanilla frosting," I tell myself aloud. And then I take a bite.

He's right. It's delicious. If I don't think about the slight texture difference with the "icing," I could be eating a cinnamon roll I bought at the bakery. Actually, it's ten times more flavorful than any of Master Durson's baked goods.

*Don't think about it*, I tell myself as I take another bite. *Don't think about the fact that the handsome Faerie who's watching you eat this cinnamon roll stroked his cock and then came all over it… Don't wonder what his cock looks like. Don't meet his eyes when you take your third bite—oh fuck, you licked frosting off your lips and now he looks absolutely feral. Don't do that again.*

His lean frame is rigid, every muscle tense, a ravenous light in his eyes. "How do you feel?" he asks in a stiff, strained tone.

I pause to contemplate, still chewing the last bite.

The exhaustion I felt has disappeared, replaced by a wholesome sense of strength and energy. My skin and hair feel as clean, smooth, and fresh as if I just bathed. When I glance down at my hands, my scars and calluses remain, but the redness and swelling of hard work has receded.

Best of all, my lungs are no longer tight and tired. I suppose I hadn't realized how often they feel that way—how frequently I have

to repress the urge to cough. There's no such urge now. Whatever damage was done to my lungs has been completely reversed.

"That is amazing," I breathe. "I feel amazing."

He flashes a gleeful smile. "I knew you would. And now, before we move on to your dress for tonight, I'd like to try something."

Skittishly I back away from him, bumping into the table with my hip.

He shakes his head, a touch of sadness in his gaze. "I won't harm you. It's nothing terrible. Please… show me your ankle. You know which one."

Biting my lip, I pull my foot out of its battered leather slipper and hold it out to him.

He goes down on one knee and props my foot on his thigh before taking a small vial from his pocket. "This water is special in my realm. It has the power to break curses."

A wave of dizzying hope washes over me, and I grip the table behind me for support.

With a pensive frown, the Faerie applies drops of the water to my anklet. It doesn't react, and when he tries to remove it, nothing happens.

"Well, fuck," he says, putting the vial away. "Now we know it isn't cursed. You can't tell me anything about it, or what it does?"

I shake my head.

Gently he thumbs the scars that peek out around the edges of the anklet. Then he lifts my foot and places a kiss first on my scars, then on the band itself.

The instant his lips touch the metal, he jerks back with a low cry of pain. His lips are seared black where he kissed the anklet.

"Why would you do that?" I exclaim.

"I'm trying a few things to see if I can help you," he mutters through his wounded mouth. "Kisses have power sometimes. It's all right, I'll heal. Slower than usual, because there's iron in that thing, or maybe something worse." Gingerly he touches his lower lip, and a piece of charred skin flakes off, leaving bloody raw flesh beneath.

"Stop hurting yourself!" I order him. "Sit down, and don't touch it anymore. Let me see it."

He sits meekly in one of the kitchen chairs and tips his face up so I can inspect his mouth.

"Ridiculous Faerie," I mutter. "You should have known it would cause you pain. It hurt you yesterday, the first time you touched it."

"I thought if a kiss worked, the pain would be worth the reward." He smiles at me, but as his lips stretch, he yells in agony.

"For Fate's sake." I roll my eyes. "Don't smile. Don't talk. Just make me another dress, and a carriage."

"You're so rude," he murmurs, blinking dark lashes at me. "Even when I'm terribly injured."

"And you're pathetic."

Why is a smile teasing at my heart, demanding to be allowed on my face? If I smile, he'll smile, and I don't want him to be in pain. His eyes are already glinting with humor, and another smile is sure to appear if I don't distract him.

So I provide a distraction by removing my work dress and standing before him in my underthings again. Only this time, after a moment's hesitation, I remove my chemise as well.

There's no humor in his eyes now, only a stunned appreciation for my breasts. He stares at them like a man entranced, until I snap my fingers in front of his face. "Wake up! Honestly, don't they have breasts where you come from?"

"They do." He swallows. "Yours are better."

"Ha! A compliment. I get another favor."

"Granted. Name it."

"I'll save it for later, thank you. And now, my gown?"

He rises and snaps his fingers in front of my face, making me blink. When I look down, I'm clad from head to toe in a dress of ivory and gold.

"Have a look," he drawls, condensing the air in front of me like he did last night, until it is solid enough to reflect me from head to toe.

My blond hair is upswept, held in place by golden pins with amber jewels. My father's watch and chain are glamoured as a series of delicate golden necklaces and one large yellow diamond. I don't

miss the fact that the neckline of the gown is lower tonight, revealing more of my breasts.

"If you want more coverage, say the word," comments the Faerie.

It's uncanny how well he can read what I'm thinking. But I don't mind the revealing gown, especially since I'm planning to see the King again. The more enticing I look, the more likely he'll be to let me enter the library vault.

"It's perfect," I say.

"Your carriage is outside. It's pure gold tonight, with gold horses. And I took the liberty of creating the illusion of a driver this time—I overlooked that little detail last night. He is merely a glamour, though. If you speak to him, he won't answer."

"I understand." I swirl back and forth in front of my reflection, enjoying the way the light plays over the rich golden fabric and the foamy lace.

"Listen." My Faerie godfather steps through the air-mirror, dispelling it. He touches the underside of my chin lightly with his forefinger to get my attention. "The food I gave you acts a little like wine. You won't lose your inhibitions, but you may feel more daring than usual. Remember to watch the time. You *must* leave by midnight, preferably a little before then. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes, you explained it all last night." I do a flourishing curtsy for him. "Now may I go?"

"You may." He starts to smile with those burned lips, then catches himself. "Have fun. Be a good girl."

"Never," I reply over my shoulder, and I start to run outside. But as I open the front door, I realize that my toes are still bare. "You forgot the shoes!" I call.

"Oh fuck," he replies, and within a split second, my feet are encased in gold heels.

As I dash down the path toward the golden carriage, a silken wrap swirls around my shoulders, protecting them from the cold evening air, and I smile to myself at my Faerie godfather's consideration. He's sweet, in more ways than one. And I am more joyous, hopeful, and energetic than I can ever remember feeling

before. My weariness, my anger, and my anxiety have faded, leaving enthusiasm and courage in their place.

I feel as if I could take on the world.

# 8

I enter the ballroom late again, trumpeted by the annoying herald. When he's finished bellowing my introduction for everyone to hear, I look straight at him and say, "Do you enjoy embarrassing people?"

He shrugs. "Most people enjoy the attention."

I lean closer, smiling, and say in a vicious undertone, "If you announce me like that again, I'll take that bugle and shove it so far down your throat it comes out your ass."

The herald clears his throat. "Understood, my lady."

"Excellent. We're going to be great friends, you and I." I pat his shoulder and turn away, sailing farther into the room.

Tonight, thanks to the Faerie treat I enjoyed, I'm a little more comfortable with all the eyes staring at me. The golden gown turns every head, including that of the Prince, who hurries over as soon as I enter.

"There you are," he says. "I was disappointed not to see you again last night."

"I'm sure my sister was excellent company," I reply.

"She was," he admits. "But I prefer you. I like people who listen as if I'm not boring them to death. People who ask intelligent questions."

I like him too. He seems like a kind person, and he's certainly brilliant. With his propensity for long one-sided conversations, I'm not sure how well the throne will suit him, but if he surrounds himself with the right people, he should be able to govern well.

Except for the fact that I'm sacrificing him to save myself. Essentially I'm betraying an entire kingdom, yielding them to my stepmother's will, just to set myself free.

What kind of person does that?

I don't want to be forced into such a diabolical decision, so it's imperative that I figure out how to disable the anklet myself. If I can do that—if I can remove it and possibly destroy it—then neither the Prince nor I will have to live under the command of my stepmother.

The Prince is looking at me expectantly, holding out his hand. I take it and move into the dance with him. "Tell me about your family," I say quickly, before he can start the conversation. "Tell me about your father."

Brantley's handsome face brightens, and for a moment I see his father's beauty in him. The topic of his father pleases him, and I'm gratified to see that their relationship is a good one.

"My father is a great leader," Brantley says. "He knows so much about all the countries of this entire world, and he has studied what we know about the Further Realms as well. We've had many long discussions about realm theory."

Unfortunately, he veers off the topic of the King into the idea of cosmic complexity, mirrored realms, the Void, and interplanetary pathways. On a normal evening I might follow him down that path with interest, but tonight I have other priorities, so when our first dance ends and I spot Amisa lingering nearby, I motion for her to approach.

"This is my other sister, Amisa," I say. "She is also interested in realm theory." I stare hard at Amisa and give her a firm nod.

To her credit, she musters enough enthusiasm to be mostly convincing. "Oh yes, realm theory. I love… realms. Which is your

favorite realm?”

This odd question distracts the Prince enough that I’m able to move away through the crowd, but there are more eyes on me tonight. The Prince has shown a marked interest in me twice, and that puts a target on my back.

I traverse the rooms of the palace’s main floor, walking slowly so I don’t draw additional interest. I don’t want people wondering why I’m in a hurry, or following me where I want to go.

There are people in the library corridor, so I have to circle through other hallways and loop back a few times before I finally find it empty. Without hesitation I dodge through the library doors and close them quietly behind me.

The library is low-lit again, partly by moonlight and partly by the golden lamps. It appears empty at first glance, but I know the King could be lurking anywhere—if he shows up at all. He’s a busy man, and he might have things to do besides me. Or he might have lost interest in me after I ran off so quickly.

The skirts of my gown are more voluminous tonight, and I hold them in both hands as I walk along the rows of bookshelves, peering down each aisle, peeking into the alcoves. The farther I go, the lower my heart sinks.

When the King steps out abruptly from the shadow of a bookcase, I scream a little.

He chuckles, deep and rich and reassuring. “Forgive me.”

For a second I’m wordless, captivated by the wolfish beauty of him… that magnificent jawline cloaked in dark scruff, those icy eyes, and the wild mane of silver hair. He’s wearing a navy suit tonight, embroidered with silver thread, and it makes him look even more handsome than he did yesterday.

“I don’t forgive easily, Your Majesty,” I reply.

“No, I don’t imagine you do.” He steps back to survey me. “This gown is lovely. It enhances your beauty to perfection.”

“Its maker would be gratified to hear that.” I can imagine the smirk of satisfaction on my Faerie godfather’s face if he heard the compliment.

"You're beautiful always," the King continues softly, "but especially when you're startled. All the defensiveness and anger leaves your face, and it's just *you*. It's the same way when you come. I can see your soul then, free of everything life has done to you."

There's a sweet intimacy in his tone that I wasn't expecting, and I feel suddenly awash with sadness. "By all appearances, I'm rich and happy," I answer. "What makes you think life has been cruel to me?"

"I can see it in your eyes. Caution, resistance, and suppressed rage." His hand runs along my arm, up to my bare shoulder. "You are beautiful, and angry, and trapped."

My jaw tightens. I'm not used to being read like this, and it makes me feel both naked and furious.

He watches me keenly. "You want to strike me for speaking to you so openly."

"No, Your Majesty."

"Do it." He takes my hand and places it on his cheek. I like the graze of his scruff against my palm.

Instead of striking him, I trace the sharp corner of his jaw, then the straight line of bone down to his square chin. "How are you so fucking pretty?" I whisper.

"How are you so fucking addictive?" he replies, low and intense. "I haven't been able to think about anything except your body since you ran away from me last night. I spent the night imagining myself chasing you into the front hall, throwing you down on the floor, and fucking you in front of all the guests."

"What's stopping you now?"

It's an impulsive question, and a foolish one because I should be asking him about the vault. And yet I'm already desperately aroused, slippery wetness seeping between my legs. Being so deeply perceived by him has made me crave him twice as much as I did last night.

"Most of the women I sleep with are interested in my power and position," he says.

"Not me," I reply. "I could care less about thrones and crowns. What I want is far simpler. I want to choose what happens to me, to my body." I move closer, my fingers trailing down the front of his shirt, my voice low and wicked. "Right now, I choose this. I choose you. Take me with gentleness or with violence. Choke me with your cock, spill your seed inside me. Do everything and anything you like, only don't make me wait, because time is short, and I can't bear it."

He's breathing hard, his chest surging against my palm. "On your knees then."

I sink down obediently while he unbuckles his belt.

"Wrists together," he says, and I hold my hands up for him while he wraps the belt around my wrists and secures it tight.

He takes out his cock, its thick length jutting from between his thighs while he positions my bound hands behind my head. He grips the belt that binds them, using it for leverage. "Open your mouth."

When I obey, he feeds his cock into the heat of my mouth.

I've never tasted cock before. His is thick, smooth, warm, and faintly salty. It smells clean and fresh, not sour or unclean as I feared it might.

With my hands bound by his belt and trapped behind my head, under the force of his grip, I'm not in control of this. And yet I don't feel trapped, because I *chose* to yield the control to him. I savor the wickedness of this act—I delight in it as he guides me forward on his cock and teaches me the rhythm he prefers.

"Relax your throat," he advises when I start to gag. He waits until the urge has passed and I move to take him deeper again. "Swirl that precious little tongue around my cock while I'm in your mouth. Let your lower teeth graze the underside, right beneath the head—fuck, yes. Right there. Shit." He groans as I begin to play with him, my teeth and tongue tantalizing his length.

"Your mouth is almost as good as your pussy," he says raggedly. "I'm going to move you faster, if you can take it."

I nod, drooling a little around his girth. He holds my wrists and uses them to move my head back and forth at a quick pace, bumping the back of my throat with every thrust.

My eyes are watering. I force my throat to relax, and I give myself over to the raw, primal joy of being used forcefully by this man, this King. I don't care how many other women have done this for him. Right now, he likes me. Wants *me*. No one else.

Part of me wishes that my stepmother could see me now, choking on the King's cock.

"Such a good fucking girl," he groans, pumping faster… and then he gasps out, "Fuck, I'm going to come."

But instead of pushing deeper, he pulls himself out of my mouth and finishes with a firm stroke of his hand, spurting his release all over my breasts. Some of the warm cum lands on my skin, and the rest sprinkles the bodice of the golden gown.

"Your dress," he pants regretfully.

"It's alright. I don't mind."

He takes out a handkerchief and wipes some of his release off the fabric. Then he helps me to my feet and plants my back against a bookshelf, holding my bound wrists above my head with his right hand while his left hand pushes down the top of my dress, exposing my breasts. He ducks his head and licks his own cum off my skin with slow, wet strokes.

I would never have imagined a man doing such a thing, but it's incredibly erotic. My panties are soaking wet.

"Oh my gods," I whisper, shivering deliciously with each pass of his warm tongue. Every inhale makes my breasts rise, the nipples peaked tight for him. He grasps one breast in his hand, squeezing it lightly as he licks his release off me.

When he's done, he shifts me over a few steps against the bookshelf. He loops the belt binding my wrists over a lantern hook affixed to a high shelf, so my arms will stay stretched above my head. I'm helpless to him, my breasts bare and my body prey to his hands.

The expression of fierce desire in his ice-gray eyes sends a quiver of anticipation along every nerve I own. He holds my gaze, unwavering, while he gathers my skirts, bunching them around my waist. His hand cups between my legs, fingertips slicking the thin, wet material over my pussy, tracing the shape of the two lips, then

touching the sensitive bits of flesh between them. I let out a sound I've never made before—a faint mew of helpless desire.

His hand dips beneath the waistband of the underwear, swirling over me. Then he shows me his fingers, shining and dripping. "Do you see this? What your body does for me?"

I nod, my teeth catching my lower lip.

He notices at once. "Stop that, or I'll have to kiss you."

"Kiss me then."

"Not until you come in my hand like a good girl."

"Yes, Your Majesty," I breathe.

He slides the panties a little way down my thighs, then curls his fingers over my pussy again. First he simply rubs me, moving his hand back and forth, slowly at first, then faster, faster, impossibly fast. It's a direct, brutal stimulation of my clit, and within seconds I'm right on the verge of coming. But he stops and plunges his hand deeper between my thighs, sinking two fingers inside me.

I shriek softly, jerking my wrists against the belt. He looks up, questioning, and I nod to let him know he can keep going. Again he thrusts with those fingers, but he ramps up to a speed that has me gasping tight little screams. Wet slapping sounds echo through the library as those two fingers thrust into my cunt and the heel of his hand beats against my clit, over and over.

I come with a gush of ecstasy, my pussy spasming against his palm. I'm helpless to the pleasure, and yet I feel the same rush of liberated euphoria that I experienced last time.

The King grips me tightly between the legs, cupping my pussy firmly while I tremble in his hand.

When the pleasure ebbs, he pulls his fingers out with a sucking squelch, then runs his thick thumb over my sensitive clit. I whimper and jerk, and he pats my wet pussy with a chuckle.

"Keep that pretty cunt open for me," he says, and I spread my thighs wider as he takes out his cock. He's hard again, which surprises me. Lowering himself slightly, he angles his cock and pushes it up into the slick warmth of my body. A moan of relief issues from him as he sheathes himself to the hilt.

He fucks me against the bookshelves with such force that they tremble, even though they're huge, heavy pieces of furniture. But they hold up to his passionate frenzy better than I do—I come again almost immediately, sobbing and panting with the exquisite bliss of the release.

Bound with my hands above my head, with a King braced against me, rutting into my body with ferocious desperation, I realize with stunned joy that I feel happier than I have ever been.

And immediately a crushing despair descends on my soul, because I can't imagine feeling this way again, with anyone else. I can't picture a future where the King wants me for more than a distraction or a dalliance. From the rumors I've heard, his mistresses never last more than a couple of months at most—usually less.

I close my eyes and focus on the crash of his body against mine, the fullness of his cock inside me, the throbbing heat as he comes. I will enjoy what's happening *now*. I refuse to let the future steal the bliss of this moment.

He goes still, panting, his cock twitching once more, deep in my body. Then he growls, "Fuck it," and kisses me.

A storm of fervent emotion explodes through my chest at the contact. He's shaking as we kiss, his grip locked on the bookshelves, his arms rigid and straining. His lips feel wet, not smooth, and I taste salt. Is he crying? I can't tell when I open my eyes—we're both in shadow between the bookshelves.

The kiss is a thunderburst, intense and fervent, over as quickly as it began. He's breathing harshly, and I can't tell whether the emotion he's feeling is from the kiss or something else.

When he drags his cock out of me, his cum runs down my leg.

For a moment he leaves me there while he turns his back and composes himself. Then he removes the belt from my wrists and puts it back on, while I straighten my clothes.

"Do you have to run off again?" he asks. "Or can you stay a while?"

Since my father's pocket watch is glamoured, I can't use it to check the time. I step out from between the bookshelves and look

for the grandfather clock that alerted me last night. It's nearly eleven.

"I have some time." I wonder if I should wait to make my request, but since there's only an hour left, I decided to plunge in. "If Your Majesty would indulge a girl's curiosity—I've heard that this library contains books about Faerie magic. Your son mentioned that the two of you like to study other realms, and I was wondering if I might look at a few of the books? The subject fascinates me."

"Books on Faerie magic?" he repeats.

"Yes, in the hidden vault." I wince. "I know it's silly of me to ask—you probably can't show those books to common visitors—"

"You're anything but a common visitor. Close your eyes and wait here, please."

I shut my eyes, scarcely daring to hope that it could be this easy, that he would give up the secret so readily. I listen to him pacing first in one direction, then another. There's a swish of heavy drapery, then a faint grinding sound, like something heavy sliding back.

"Come and view the secret vault," he calls.

Opening my eyes, I hurry toward the sound of his voice.

He's standing between two of the reading alcoves. What looked like a wall between them is now a doorway leading into a small yet cozy room, with bookshelves of gleaming yellow oak. On the floor lie three huge white cushions in which someone could nestle while reading. A small chandelier with frosted glass hangs overhead, white antlers branching from it toward the ceiling.

I step inside, afraid to breathe lest it disappear. "This is the vault? Are there any books about breaking spells?"

"To be honest, I haven't spent much time in here."

"But the Prince said you like to study the realms."

"Well, yes… but I haven't read many of the books on Faerie magic," he explains. "My specialty is mostly volumes on cosmic philosophy. But we can look for some books about spellcraft. Is there a particular kind of spell you need to break?"

I want to tell him everything. The words flow to the tip of my tongue, but when I part my lips to speak them, the anklet grows hot

as a warning. The King didn't seem to notice my anklet last night or tonight, and I'm not about to draw his attention to the fact that I'm wearing an object of malevolent magic.

"I have a friend in need of help," I say. "I'm sorry, I can't explain more than that."

"Hm." He looks pensive. "We have no palace sorcerer whose services I can offer."

"I know. A little information will be enough. Thank you."

As I move to enter the vault, he bars my way with his arm, his expression sober. "You wanted this all along. Access to this room."

"Yes," I admit.

"And you thought, by getting close to me, the path would be cleared for you to enter it."

I pucker my lips, trying to think of a lie, but I swerve back to honesty again. "I did think that, yes. But believe me—I would have fucked you even if there was no such vault. You've made me feel more liberated and more alive these two nights than I've felt in seventeen years."

He tilts his head. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"There's quite a gap between our ages."

"I don't care." Impulsively I take his hand and kiss his knuckles. There's a haunted hurt in his eyes, and I desperately want to erase it. "Please believe that I didn't do this just to see the vault. In fact, if I weren't trying to help someone, I would walk right out of here and prove to you that my interest was—and is—sincere."

"I will forgive you for this," he says, "if you will promise to forgive me for something."

"Of course. What is it?"

"A future sin."

I frown. "That's cryptic."

"So are you." The corner of his perfect lips twitches upward, and he sweeps his arm toward the vault in a welcoming gesture. "Come, let us search together for books about breaking spells."

# 9

I'm late again.

My carriage disappeared halfway down the lane to Eisling House, and my clothes vanished a few minutes later. So I'm walking naked and barefoot over gravel, cursing my lack of attention to the time. It's freezing, but I'm so frustrated about my visit to the vault that the cold seems like a secondary concern.

If the King and I had found anything useful, I might be in a better mood. A chapter in one of the books mentioned the Unending Pool, a place in the Fae realm whose water can break any curse. The liquid my Faerie godfather poured over the anklet must have been from that pool. There's also a well in some part of Faerie whose water interferes with a Fae's ability to heal or to perform magic. Which doesn't help me at all.

I found information about kisses, death, and soul-bonds having the power to shatter some kinds of dark spells. There are specific weapons that can destroy charmed objects, but nothing I could obtain in a day or two. I wouldn't even know where to start looking. Finding those weapons would require quests I have no time for,

journeys I can't undertake with my stepmother's will confining me to this town.

Gilda can only give me commands when I'm close enough to hear her; but since the anklet connects us, she can exert her will to call me into her presence anytime she wishes, no matter how much distance lies between us. I tested that distance once, at age thirteen, when I tried to run away. I paid for a wagon ride with a merchant and traveled for ten hours before I felt her calling me. The force of the call was so compelling that I leaped from the wagon and began running in the direction of Eisling House. When I finally made it back, Gilda told me to beat my own legs with switches until they bled. I still have the scars all over my shins and thighs.

I can't leave, which means I can't search for any of the weapons that might have a chance of cutting through the anklet.

I curse loudly, kicking the cold gravel without caring that I'm bruising my toes. The only thing I'm wearing at the moment is the damned anklet, and I've never hated it so much.

Someone is coming toward me, silhouetted by the light from the lampposts flanking the drive. I recognize the silhouette, the outline of the pointed ears, and the sauntering gait. My Faerie godfather is a fool to show himself out here.

I race toward him, and he opens his arms as if he expects me to run into them. But instead I grab his shoulder, turn him roughly around, and march him back toward the house.

"What are you thinking, walking out in the open?" I exclaim. "What if someone sees you? They'll tell my stepmother, and then she'll—" I break off the sentence. I don't know what she would do if she found out I have a Faerie's favor. Nothing good, that's for sure.

"What if someone sees *me?*" he says. "What about *you*? Jogging along stark naked, with those luscious breasts bouncing around—"

"That's a compliment," I snarl, pushing him through the front door. "I get another favor."

He grumbles, but he conjures a fluffy pink robe for me without being asked. I forget to be angry with him for a second because the softness of the robe around my body is so comforting.

"Thank you," I say, slightly mollified. "But don't go outside again, please. Or if you do, take another form."

"Like this?" He transforms into a naked green-skinned creature with arms like branches and fingers like vines, with flowers growing in its mossy hair.

"Fuck no. Something normal."

"Of course." And he turns himself into Gilda.

I recoil instinctively, stumbling back into the narrow table by the front door and knocking off a vase. It shatters, but I'm still backing away, and I step on a shard before I can stop myself. Pain punches through my fear as the sharp piece of porcelain slices into my foot.

Instantly the Faerie switches back to his usual form. "God-stars, I didn't mean to… shit. I should have made you some slippers—why do I always forget the shoes? Let me see it."

"I've had worse. Can you conjure me a bandage or something so I don't track blood everywhere?"

He produces a strip of cloth, and while I wrap up my foot, he mends the vase and makes the blood on the floor disappear.

"Must be fucking nice," I mutter. "Fixing everything with magic."

"It can't resolve everything," he replies. "And it takes energy. As I told you, my energy reserves are lower than that of most Fae, since I have human blood."

"You said your father is Fae and your mother is human? Are they together?"

"Yes, she has lived in Faerie for decades. My father says it's his love that keeps her young, but the truth is that humans don't age in our realm—or if they do, the process is far slower than it is here."

"So why not stay in Faerie with your family?" I ask. "Why come here, to this miserable mess of a world?"

He crouches in front of me and takes over with the bandage, tightening and tying it. "I like to help people. I serve in areas where the Fae are revered or at least accepted. It's safer that way for someone like me, someone with limited powers. I've been serving humans in need for about thirty years now."

"And how old are you?"

"Fifty-three." He rises and holds out his hand to help me up.

My impulse is to reject it, but I relent and lay my fingers in his palm. "Do you visit Faerie often?"

"I do. As I told you when we first met, I was born under unusual circumstances, and my mother is god-touched, which means one of her parents slept with a god-star and was granted the Wretched Sight. As her son, I have a few unique gifts, one of which is the ability to transfer between the mortal and Faerie realms easily, whenever I like, and to travel *within* those realms as well. I can create portals in the air, similar to the mirror I made for you, and I simply walk from one side to the other."

"Could you get something for me, if I needed it?" I ask.

"Something like what?"

I describe the weapons I saw in the book, the ones that can cut apart enchanted objects. His face falls as I go through the list.

"I know where two of them are," he says. "One is in the palace back home, and the other is in Unseelie lands. I can get the first one for you, the Void-Star Dagger—but the Wraith's Scythe isn't something I can access. The Unseelie kingdom is a troubled place—less so than it used to be, but still dangerous. I'll see if I can bring you the Void-Star Dagger tomorrow night. Perhaps it will work on the anklet."

It's the best he can do, so I nod. "Thank you."

He helps me to a kitchen chair, eyeing my injured foot. "You know I could heal that for you. It would only take a few moments."

He's talking about his "vital essence" and its restorative power. He's offering to feed me his cum.

Heat quivers at my core and buzzes along my skin. I can feel the blood surging into my cheeks. "No."

"You'd rather limp around the ball tomorrow night?"

He's right, damn it. With this injury, dancing will be impossible and walking will be difficult. "When you bring the dagger, maybe you can bring another cinnamon roll as well."

"I'll be glad to," he says. "If you're sure you don't want immediate relief."

"You realize you're asking if you can come in my mouth."

"That would be the easiest way to do it, yes." He smirks a little. His burned lips are noticeably better, but they still look raw and painful. I remember how he knelt and kissed my anklet, knowing it would hurt him, hoping his kiss might set me free. It was a lovely thing for him to do, and I've looked at him a little differently since then.

After the King and I explored the vault, he didn't mention wanting to see me a third time. To be fair, I ran away from him again when the clock began to strike, but he could have called out to me. I even lingered in the hallway, just to see if he would catch up and request another tryst. But he didn't.

The King is wonderful, and my heart aches that I ruined our connection with distrust. But I will probably never see him again, so I shouldn't feel guilty about taking pleasure elsewhere. After all, I haven't committed myself solely to him. I'm free to do what I like, within the confines of my stepmother's laws. And my Faerie godfather is not one of the young men I'm forbidden to fuck. He might look as if he's in his mid-twenties, but he's neither young nor human.

There's no one here to know what happens between us—no one to rebuke me for whatever I choose to do.

"My family might be back soon," I say. "How fast can we do this?"

He chuckles, and something in the sound tugs at my brain. "I have a fresh memory of you running toward me naked. It won't take long."

"Maybe this will help." With my heart pounding at my own boldness, I rise from the chair and take off the fluffy robe, spreading it on the floor. I seat myself on it, naked, in as graceful a pose as I can manage.

"That certainly helps." His voice is tight with need, and there's a pronounced shape pressing against the front of his trousers. He unbuttons them and produces a long, smooth cock, flushed pink, with glistening arousal already beading at its tip.

He steps up beside me, stroking himself, and I try not to think about how much I like watching his ring-laden fingers gliding along

his length.

"You fucked someone again tonight," he says. Not a question. A statement of fact, one I can't deny, so I say nothing.

The Faerie's eyes travel my body, lingering with particular fondness on my breasts. "Tell me what it was like. How you felt."

"Why do you want to know? You and I have a bargain based on a deal you made with my father. Nothing more. And this, what we're doing now—it's merely a business transaction. Count it as one of the favors you owe me, if you like."

"A business transaction… because you'd never consider fucking me."

Again, a statement, one that sends a wild thrill through my chest. "You're Fae."

"And?" He keeps stroking, but he's looking me in the eyes now.

"It would be complicated."

"Your other dalliance isn't?"

He's got me there. For a few moments, I can't figure out how to respond.

"You're beautiful," I say at last. "And you're sweet. And you know too much about me, yet not enough. I couldn't bear it."

He hesitates, long fingers curled around his cock. "You couldn't bear it? What does that mean?"

It means he's too close to me already, just like the King. And I couldn't bear to let anyone else that deep inside my body and my heart, only to lose them. I'm already sad about the King—if I went through something similar with the Faerie, it would hurt too much.

Instead of answering him, I tip my face up, open my mouth, and put out my tongue. His lavender eyes heat instantly and he resumes stroking himself. Seconds later he's moving closer, aiming for my open lips without touching me. His release hits the flat of my tongue, glazing it in vanilla sweetness.

He keeps coming, huffing ragged breaths, maintaining his aim so every drop goes in my mouth. I have to tip my head back to take it all. When he's done, I close my lips and swallow it down, like a delicious mouthful of runny icing.

Immediately the pain in my foot recedes, and a sense of peace and freshness flows over my body. “That’s quite the trick,” I tell him with reluctant admiration.

He’s buttoning his pants and smiling at me when we both hear the wheels of the carriage on the drive.

“The work begins again,” I say with a sigh.

“At least you won’t be limping,” he replies. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He bends down and plants a quick kiss on my forehead. Then he walks into thin air and vanishes.

When I unfasten the bandage around my foot, the wound is gone.

# 10

The screaming starts the moment my step-family enters the house. Vashli and Amisa are both hysterical, both drunk, and both hoarse from shrieking at each other, which they've probably been doing since they set foot in the carriage for the ride home.

From what I can discern, soon after I left Amisa with the Prince, Vashli moved in and ensnared him, monopolizing his attention skillfully for two hours before he excused himself to dance with other ladies. Amisa is distraught over the loss of the time she felt she was owed with him, while Vashli is both triumphant at her success and upset that the Prince didn't spend the whole night with her.

My stepmother says very little to them or to me. "Bring me a glass of whiskey," she orders me in an undertone. "I have a headache, and I'm going to bed."

I follow her orders, then return downstairs and stand quietly in the hall while my stepsisters bawl threats at each other. I was given no command to help them prepare for bed, so when the fight escalates to them throwing vases and shoes at each other, I head downstairs to the cellar. Hopefully they won't kill each other, but if

they do, so be it. Either way, I'll have a mess to clean up tomorrow, and I need my sleep.

The one good thing about the fight is that I wasn't questioned about how I spent the evening, and no one seemed to notice the fluffy robe I was wearing, which I forgot to swap for one of my usual well-worn garments.

All of them sleep until noon the next morning, which is a delight for me. I ponder cleaning up the mess in the hallway myself, and then I have a rather brilliant idea. A certain Faerie owes me a favor, so I muster a tear and smooth it over the face of my pocket watch.

The Faerie appears in the cellar, and this time I spot how he does it—walking out of a sheet of shimmering air, a barely visible portal. He glances around, then covers his mouth and coughs lightly. "You sleep down here?"

"Yes," I reply, feeling a little self-conscious about the grimy, dusty state of the place. I try to keep it tidy, but there's only so much one can do with a coal cellar. "I need a favor. There's a mess upstairs, lots of broken things, and I know you can fix it all with magic. But you can't be seen, so I want you to glamour yourself to look like me and go clean it up."

He raises an eyebrow. "Glamour myself to look like you?"

"Exactly. And if anyone comes downstairs while you're cleaning up, act as if you're cleaning it normally, not with magic. Can you sound like me, too?"

"I can alter my voice, yes."

"Perfect. Get on with it, then."

He taps his lips, which have fully healed. "Can I fondle my own breasts while I'm glamoured in your form?"

"You're disgusting."

"It's a fair question."

"No, it's not. Go." I push him toward the cellar stairs.

"And where will you be while I'm doing your work?"

"Taking a nap."

"Very well," he drawls, with mock reluctance. "I suppose I'll do this for you. But after that I must go. I have places to be, important things to accomplish."

I hesitate, my hands still pressed to his back. “Do you have other humans you’re helping?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

“So it’s just me?”

He turns around so quickly I catch my breath. His lavender eyes meet mine with an expression so intimate and tender I almost can’t bear it.

“It’s just you,” he says.

“Oh,” I say breathlessly, my face burning. “Well… that’s good. Now, go on.”

The Faerie transforms into *me*, complete with the same blue work dress I’m wearing. He takes a cautious peek down the front of the dress, waggles my own eyebrow at me, and continues upstairs.

“Fuck you,” I murmur as I descend the steps and fling myself onto my cot.

I’m exhausted, but I can’t sleep. I keep seeing two faces dancing around in my head—the silver-haired King with his bold jaw and wolfish eyes, and the slim purple-haired Faerie with his light, sarcastic voice and unexpected tenderness. I’ve never asked his name. Perhaps I should. And I should tell him my name, too. I’d like to hear it from his mouth.

Fuck, did I really just think that? Do I wonder what it would be like to hear him say “Celinda” with that smirking mouth of his? Or… what if he gasps out my name while he’s coming?

A trickle of delicate pleasure runs along my pussy, and I put my hand under the blankets, working my way beneath my dress and underwear. I shiver when my fingertips brush my clit. I’m more sensitive than usual lately. After the long sexual drought I’ve experienced, my body is roaring to life, having its first great awakening.

Arching my knees, I rub my fingers in quick circles. It should take the Faerie a while to finish his task, so I have a few moments of privacy.

Shit, now he’s in my head. I picture him as he stood over me last night, his hips swayed toward me, his elegant fingers stroking his cock until he shot delicious cum over my tongue…

"All done," he announces cheerfully, appearing abruptly in the cellar.

I whip my hand out from between my legs and sit up, a guilty heat flaming in my cheeks. "Fuck you! I told you I was going to take a nap!"

The Faerie has resumed his usual form. He cocks his head, his nostrils quivering. "Hmm. Taking a nap, were you?"

"Stop *smelling*."

"You might as well tell me to stop breathing." He turns a wooden chair backward and sits astride it, crossing his arms over the chair back and watching me with interest. "By all means continue what you were doing. You watched me pleasure myself, so it's only fair I should observe you."

"I thought you were busy," I counter. "You have things to do."

His tongue traces his lips, and his grin turns feral. "Nothing so interesting as this."

My pussy feels swollen with heat and need, but I'm not so desperate that I'll come on my fingers while he watches. "I'll see you tonight," I tell him firmly.

"As you wish." He rises with a sigh, blows me a kiss, and disappears.

When he leaves, I lie back on the bed and stare at the ceiling. But I don't resume what I was doing. Instead, I chastise myself inwardly for having sexual encounters with two different men. I haven't promised myself to either of them, so I'm within my rights to do as I like, but it feels odd to me. As if I should choose one. But neither is a permanent fixture in my life, so why shouldn't I enjoy them both while I have the chance?

Once my stepmother and stepsisters rise, the work begins again. Vashli and Amisa seem silently astonished that all the things they broke last night have been mysteriously mended. But they don't mention it to me or their mother. They were both quite drunk—maybe they assume they're remembering the fight incorrectly. It's amusing to watch their confusion.

My stepmother still has a headache. She gets terrible ones occasionally, and I've learned to appreciate them, because when

she's in the throes of one, she's quiet and less prone to give me orders.

Between her headache and the events of last night, there's significantly less enthusiasm among my step-family about going to yet another ball. Halfway through the afternoon, my stepmother announces, "Cinders and I will be staying home tonight. I plan to take a sleeping potion and get some relief from this pain in my head. Cinders, prepare the girls. They will attend the ball together."

"Just the two of us?" shrills Amisa.

"Yes," replies her mother curtly. "It's time to see what you can do with His Royal Highness when Cinders isn't there to snare his attention on your behalf. Whatever you do, *do not* fight over the Prince in public, do you understand? Save your battles for later. Present a united front, and be the most loving and charming sisters that were ever seen. Or else."

"Yes, Mother," they reply in chastened tones.

I'm secretly delighted. When Gilda said I would be staying home, she didn't word it as a command; it was a statement. An oversight caused by her pounding headache. I'm only bound to help the girls prepare—I'm not restricted to the house. Once Gilda is soundly asleep, I'll be free to leave.

I can't appear in the ballroom lest my stepsisters notice me, but perhaps I can meet the King in the library again and explore more of the books—or more of him. I think I'm becoming rather addicted to secret trysts and stolen pleasures.

Getting my stepsisters ready is far easier this evening. They're more subdued, too tired to think of cutting remarks, intent on their own schemes for attracting the Prince. I take my time with each of them, offering quiet advice and fixing their hair and makeup so they each appear to their best advantage. Vashli smiles when she sees her reflection, and Amisa actually thanks me. I think I might faint from shock.

Shortly after Worden drives them away in the carriage, I prepare Gilda's sleeping potion. I'm drizzling some honey into the potion to improve the taste when my Faerie godfather appears in the kitchen. Tonight he's dressed in dazzling white with a purple scarf,

and he looks so startlingly beautiful that my jaw actually drops when I see him.

"You're early," I whisper. "My stepmother is upstairs. I can't leave until after she drinks this potion and falls asleep."

"Potion?" He bends over, holding his scarf against his chest while he sniffs at the mug. "There's no magic in that."

"Just herbs. But it's usually effective."

"Let's make sure she stays asleep." He passes his fingers in a circle over the cup and whispers something I don't understand. "There. That will keep her in dreamland until late tomorrow morning."

"You're rather useful, you know," I tell him.

"Why, thank you."

"Now hush, and wait here."

I take the tray and carry it upstairs to the darkened room where my stepmother lies. I leave the bedroom door open, giving her just enough illumination by which to see the tray and drink the potion. She sits up and gestures for me to hand her the mug, but she doesn't speak to me. I wait patiently until she has drained it all. Then I pick up the tray and leave the room, closing the door behind me.

When I return to the kitchen, the Faerie is tilted back in a chair with his boots propped on the table.

"Off," I tell him, and he reluctantly swings his feet down again. "Did you bring the dagger?"

He strikes his forehead with his palm. "Shit, I forgot."

"You what?" I start toward him, incensed, but he holds up a finger and frowns as if he's thinking. Then, with a flourish of his other hand, he produces a dagger from thin air. It has a poisonous-looking green blade and a hilt like a coiled snake.

"You absolute fiend," I hiss. "This is not a joking matter."

"All matters are joking matters," he replies. "Especially the most serious subjects."

Instead of dignifying that with a response, I set my foot on his knee. "Try it."

My stomach flips over with a panicked throb of hope as he brandishes the dagger. If it works, I could be free in a matter of seconds—free forever. I can't even imagine the wonder of that future.

He sets the blade to the gold band around my ankle and saws against it for several seconds. Then he tries stabbing the anklet. But I can tell by the bend of his brows that if the dagger was going to work, it would have done so immediately.

"It's alright," I say, even as my heart goes cold and dark.

"I brought a few other things to try." A leather satchel appears out of thin air, and he dumps its contents onto the kitchen table. I don't recognize half the items he brought, but I remain still, watching him smear the anklet with pastes and creams, drizzle it with various liquids, and ply various weapons and objects against it. He even prepares a concoction of herbs, lights it, and waves the smoke back and forth while reciting a spell in some other language.

The anklet doesn't react to any of it.

"Fuck this fucking thing," he snarls, pushing my foot off his knee and shoving himself back from the table. With a tempestuous burst of glittering blue magic, he explodes every item he brought into puffs of dust, then hurls the satchel into the fireplace. He stands by the mantelpiece, gripping it with one hand, staring into the flames.

"Your stepmother put the anklet on you," he says. "I've figured out that much. She controls you with it, somehow."

A long sigh pours out of me. It's an immeasurable relief, just knowing that *someone* knows about the truth.

"I've seen your scars," he continues without looking at me. "I know she has made you do terrible things to yourself. And I assume she has laid various laws upon you, under which you must operate—such as the rule that you may not tell anyone about the anklet or its purpose."

Too overcome to speak, I simply nod.

"I wish I could kill her for you," he says earnestly. "But I took a vow before the god-stars, years ago, that I would value mortal life and never kill a human. For a Faerie like me, breaking such a vow can have lethal consequences."

Just my fucking luck.

"Even if I had not taken such a vow, killing her might destroy you as well," he adds. "That object has been spelled with very powerful magic, and sometimes, if the master of such an object dies, the wearer dies as well, or is forever trapped by the orders the master gave while they were living."

Dread seeps into my soul. "I didn't realize that could happen."

"It's a very real possibility, unfortunately." He gives a frustrated sigh. "What I don't understand is why she chose *you* to wear it, instead of someone with greater power and fortune."

"I've wondered that too. She ensnared my father with it, and he killed himself to escape. I think she was so furious about what he did that she put it on me, as a way of punishing him from beyond the grave. I doubt he ever imagined she'd do such a thing to a child."

It's strange, being able to talk about it aloud, but the anklet doesn't stop me. Perhaps, because the Faerie knows my secret, he's exempt from the rule that I can't tell anyone.

Emboldened, I continue. "My father probably figured Gilda would look for another powerful victim. As you said, it would make more sense. But I think she was so angry with him that vengeance felt like her only recourse."

"And she has never tried to find another man to ensnare?"

"She tried and failed for years, and then she gave up. Men in this kingdom aren't kind to women above a certain age."

He scoffs. "How foolish of them. Youth is fleeting, and beauty is common. Intelligence, humor, and spirit are of greater value."

"I would agree with that. But unfortunately, beauty is what most men understand. You yourself aren't exempt from the seduction of beauty. Though I can't understand what you see in me, when you must have met so many beautiful Fae women."

"In Faerie, especially in my home kingdom, we're surrounded by pristine loveliness," he says. "I prefer something more earthy, more carnal, less flawlessly perfect. The very appeal of humans is your mortality, your fragility. The fact that you're so deliciously

corruptible.” He turns from staring into the fire and looks at me. “You are gorgeous. Any flaws only make you more appealing.”

I swallow down a lump in my throat, fighting the tears threatening to fill my eyes. “That’s another compliment.”

“If you would let me, I would give you a thousand compliments,” he says softly. “And a thousand favors in payment.”

He’s making this so difficult. Confusing me so thoroughly that I barely know what I want anymore. Still, no matter how many sweet words he offers, he is a denizen of another realm, a servant of magic, an unknown entity whom I cannot fully trust. I’m not sure I will ever be able to trust another living soul.

What if he lures me in with his kindness, and then traps me like my stepmother trapped my father? I’m sure Gilda said wonderful things to him when they first met—wrapped him up tight in cords woven of golden words. She soothed him, seduced him, claimed him. Their courtship was quick and their marriage was sudden, and it led to disaster, both for my father and for me. I can’t allow myself to be enchanted by anyone who wields magic. I can’t break out of one prison only to climb into another.

The Faerie has been watching me with a keen look in his eyes, like he’s reading my very soul. Like he understands the thoughts passing through my mind.

He doesn’t speak any more of compliments and favors. Instead he says lightly, “What sort of dress would you like tonight? I was thinking of a gown even bigger than the others…”

“Oh, no.” I shake my head. “I’m not supposed to be there tonight, so I can’t be noticed. I was hoping you could create something else for me. Something dark and sleek, with a cloak. And… some beautiful underthings.” I blush at my own request.

His gaze turns sober. “You want me to dress you in sensual attire for your secret lover?”

“Yes.”

He groans. “You realize this is traumatic for me.”

“It shouldn’t be,” I say primly. “Remember, you and I have a business arrangement, nothing more.”

"Of course. Business. Very well then." He waves a hand at me, and all my clothes vanish. Before I can gasp or yell at him, his magic dresses me in a clinging web of black lace and thin leather straps, complete with thigh-high lace stockings and garters. He gives me a second to absorb the look, and then he flings a simple, form-fitting black dress over it all. Instead of buttons at the back, this dress has ribbons along my left side, holding it together—and making it easy to untie and remove.

The Faerie's magic twines my blond hair into a loose braid.

"Shoes," I remind him.

"Right." He snaps his fingers, and black heels form around my feet, lifting me slightly. "You're still far too eye-catching, so—the cloak, as requested." As he speaks, a heavy, hooded cloak enshrouds me. "And black gloves, too. There you are. The perfect outfit for a clandestine meeting of lovers."

He speaks cheerfully, but I don't miss the twinge of pain in his eyes, despite his bright smile.

Impulsively I move toward him, but he looks away, his gaze downcast. I press my gloved hand against his cheek and turn his face to mine.

"My name is Celinda," I tell him.

His lips part, startled pleasure replacing the pain. "Celinda."

Hearing him say my name is even lovelier than I thought it would be. "Will you tell me your name?"

"Bold of you to ask," he says with a playful arch of his brow. "In the past, Faeries haven't given their true names freely, but that principle is becoming far more relaxed lately. So I'll give you my name, if you'll promise to use it often."

"I will use it every time I rebuke you for something," I say.

"All the time then! Perfect. My name is Killian."

"Killian. It's a pleasure to meet you properly."

"Since when do you and I do anything properly?" He winks at me. "Your stepmother should be soundly asleep now. If you like, I can transport you to the palace through one of my portals."

"You can take people with you?"

"Two living things can pass through one of my portals, yes."

“And why have you never offered this service before, Killian?”

He grins wider, a touch of pink on his cheeks. “You never asked. And on those other nights, you needed to arrive at the palace like a normal human would. Tonight, you’re sneaking in, so a sneaky entrance seems appropriate.”

“How will I get home?”

“I’ll have a black coach waiting. When you’re ready to leave, simply stand on the palace steps, and it will come to you.”

The sheer power of the magic behind that statement boggles my mind. He talks of summoning magical carriages like it’s normal, like it’s easy. One more proof that his life and mine are vastly different, and could never be compatible.

# 11

Killian portals me into the back corner of the palace garden, a safe place where we're less likely to encounter anyone who might wonder how we emerged from thin air.

Traveling by portal is simpler than I expected—like stepping through a doorway. I felt a rush of cold and a burst of sparkling magic over my body, and then I was standing in the snow-covered garden, staring at a huge silent fountain featuring a pair of stone dragons and two knights on horseback.

"I trust you can find your way from here?" Killian asks.

"I can, thank you."

"Then I'll be off. Busy, busy." He creates another shimmering portal and vanishes.

I pull the warm cloak tighter around me and head down the path toward the lighted windows of the immense palace. My plan remains the same—go to the library, see if the King is there, and ask if he's willing to continue our trysts even though he now knows I have another agenda.

Truth be told, even if he wants to help me do research again, I'm not very hopeful we'll find a solution for my problem. My Faerie

godfather has been using all the resources at his disposal to get the anklet off me, with no luck. I doubt that a human library will provide anything Killian hasn't already considered.

But even without the lure of the library and freedom, I would still want to see the King. And yes—it's partly because it's deeply flattering that the most influential man in the kingdom lusts for me. It's a boost to my confidence, and I *deserve* to feel confident, desirable, and powerful.

I encounter a fork in the garden path and debate for a few seconds before turning right. As it happens, that is the entirely wrong direction, so I retrace my steps and go left—but that path also turns away from the palace.

I don't understand the layout of this garden at all. It's ridiculous. There should be a straight path going from the back to the front, a route that's easy to find and follow.

For several more minutes I wander around, convinced I can find my way and too stubborn to call Killian. The cloak, shoes, and gloves I'm wearing seem to guard against the cold better than any clothing I've ever worn, probably due to Fae magic, but my face is cold, and the tip of my nose is going numb. So when I encounter a greenhouse whose glass walls are steamy with warmth, I open the door and duck inside.

Humid air envelops me, so heavy with moisture and heat that I immediately remove the cloak and gloves, laying them over a small table by the door. I move deeper into the greenhouse, admiring the rows of lush potted plants. Some of the flowers are strange to me, exotic and beautiful.

As I turn a corner around a cluster of small fruit trees, I spot a man standing in the next aisle, watering a plant. He's shirtless. Corded muscles stand out on his arm as he holds the big watering can.

I would recognize that gorgeous mane of silver hair anywhere.

Panicking, I dart behind the fruit trees, but my heel hits a stack of empty clay pots and they topple over with a clatter.

"Fuck," I hiss.

"Who's there?" calls the King.

I wince, but there's nothing else for it. No way to escape.

"An assassin," I say. And I wait for his reply.

There's a smile in his voice when he responds. "You must be new to the assassination game. Announcing yourself isn't the best way to surprise your prey."

"They told me you'd be an easy mark," I reply, still concealed from him behind the trees. "You're always wandering around without your guards."

"I shouldn't have to rely on guards in my own home," he says. "Besides, any assassin who came after me would have a fight on their hands."

"Is that so? You think you could take me?"

"Sweetheart, I'll take you anytime you want."

The term of endearment surprises me. I'm smiling ridiculously wide and I can't stop. Yet it hurts to be so happy, because I know it won't last. "Prepare to yield, Your Majesty."

"Gladly."

It's time to be brave and bold. To show the King that I still want him, and that I'm not someone he can easily dismiss or forget.

I undo the ties along my left side and let the dress fall. Then I step out into the greenhouse aisle, dressed only in bits of leather and lace, with the blond braid over my shoulder.

The King goes still for a second, taking in the scanty outfit I'm wearing. Then he starts toward me, a hunter's ferocity in his eyes.

I run to him, forgetting any games of pretend, and launch myself into his arms. He catches me up and spins me around, then captures my mouth with his.

I moan into the kiss, conscious of his large hand gripping my ass cheek while his other arm bands my waist.

"I wasn't sure you'd want to see me again," I gasp, nuzzling the scruff that cloaks his jaw.

"I will crave the sight of you every night until I die," he says.

I withdraw a little, looking into his eyes. Here is another man who charms women with pretty words that he probably doesn't mean. I must remember that, enticing as his company is, I can't trust him any more than I can trust Killian.

The thought makes me sad and angry at once, and I hate feeling that way when I'm supposed to be enjoying myself. This is *my* time. My escape from drudgery and darkness.

Fury blends with lust, and I shove him back with all my might. "Take off your clothes. Everything. The boots, too."

He doesn't protest or demand my respect—in fact, he looks rather excited at the prospect, a slow smile curving his mouth. He strips and stands in front of me, broad and brawny and naked, silver hair furring his chest and curling around the base of his cock.

I seize a folded cloth from nearby. It's a little rough, probably used to wrap plants or their roots. "Spread this out and lie down on it."

He follows my directions, and a triumphant frenzy blazes through my heart at being obeyed, at having someone who will yield to my commands and submit to me.

I don't remove my stockings or heels—I rather like the effect they provide. Besides, they hide my anklet, and the last thing I need is someone else questioning me about it. I want to forget everything right now. I want to use this gorgeous, powerful man in a way I've never dared to use anyone.

I stalk up to his prone form, lift my foot, and nudge his erect cock with the glossy black toe of my shoe.

"This is a new side of you," he says.

"I have many angles." I trace my toe up and down the underside of his cock until he groans and reaches down as if to touch himself.

I switch my stance, catching his wrist with my foot, kicking it aside, and pinning it to the floor with just enough pressure to make him wince. He could easily break free, but he stays there, and his cock bobs twice, a sign that my forcefulness is making him even more aroused.

"Do not touch yourself," I tell him.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Those words are the sweetest music to my ears. But I can't let myself read into them. He would never make me his Queen, and

even if he did, he's planning to abdicate the throne to his son soon. My reign would be short-lived.

And my stepmother would never let it happen.

She ruins everything, everything…

As anger floods through me again, I move my foot from the King's wrist to his chest, sliding the high-heeled shoe between his pectorals up to his throat, pressing lightly. He tilts his head back. "Fuck, Celinda."

I freeze. "You know who I am?"

"I asked around. You've made quite the impression on my court. On my son, as well. He's very interested in you."

"Oh." I bite my lip, removing my foot from his neck. "I don't want to hurt him."

"He'll find someone else," says the King with a deep, desperate urgency that makes me hot all over. "Step on me again, for fuck's sake."

So I do. I press his neck and throat with my heels, and then I tease his cock with the toe of my shoe until he's writhing, every muscle in his glorious chest and abdomen straining with need. Only then do I crouch over him, shift a bit of lace aside, and impale myself fully on his thick cock.

"Shit," I breathe, pushing all the way down. He grabs my hips, and I clasp my hands over his pecs, jolting up and down as I ride him. The pleasure is building, but not fast enough, so I circle two fingertips over my clit, working my way toward the peak.

"I'm going to come," he gasps, chest heaving.

But I grip his jaw tightly, then smack his cheek. "No. You do not come until I do."

His handsome face contorts in pleasurable agony. "Oh fuck, do that again. Please. Please."

I can't express how much I crave his submission, his misery, his desperation. I slap his face once more, lightly. "Wait your turn."

Then I lean back, with his cock still inside me, and I toy with my clit, holding his gaze the whole time.

"You're so beautiful," he says hoarsely. "So fucking beautiful, so wicked, so sinful. My exquisite Sin."

I'm panting, squirming on him, so close. "Call me that again."

"Sin," he hisses. "My wicked fucking Sin."

"Yes, fuck…" I bounce on him again, and the orgasm snaps through my body almost instantly, flinging me into a state of near madness. My vision whites out, stars burst in my head, my thighs tremble violently, and I scream my euphoria into the humid air of the greenhouse.

He comes the second after I do, our sweat-slick bodies throbbing in sync. He pulls me down to his chest, wraps me tight, and rolls his hips slightly, moving inside me, emptying all his cum into my body. The friction of his abdomen against my pussy, along with the movement deep in my core, feels too good to be true.

"Oh shit, I'm coming again," I sob, and I do. I come on him a second time while he pushes my hair back from my face and closes his lips over mine, savoring all my tremulous moans within the heat of his mouth.

At that moment, the door of the greenhouse opens.

"Shit!" I whisper. Quickly I separate my body from his, dart to the end of the row, and grab my dress from the floor. I retreat just in time, ducking behind a tall plant as two guards come into view.

"Your Majesty?" one of them calls.

While I wrap my dress around myself, the King sits up on the cloth, naked and entirely unbothered. "I'm here, and I'm perfectly safe. Wait outside."

"Is someone in here with you, Sire?" asks a guard.

"It's a lady," replies the King. "A little privacy, if you don't mind."

"Of course, Your Majesty." Their footsteps retreat, and the greenhouse door closes.

The King grins at me. "The life of a royal."

"Must be annoying."

"Very." He gets up and begins to dress himself. But a moment later the outer door bangs again, and the Prince's voice calls, "Father? The guards said you were in here."

"Oh no," I whisper, aghast. The plant I'm standing behind won't be enough to conceal me if the Prince comes down this row to speak

to his father. And I dread the thought of causing Brantley any pain or jealousy.

"Hide over there." The King points to a large clump of berry bushes with plenty of thick foliage. I duck into them and crouch down.

The King folds up the cloth we used and sets it aside casually as the Prince comes down the aisle.

"She didn't come." Brantley's voice is strained, distressed.

"Who?"

"The girl, Celinda. The blond one with the lovely dresses, the one who is kind and listens so well. She isn't here tonight."

"Isn't she always late?" asks the King.

"Yes, but this is later than usual. I don't think she's coming. Her sisters are here, but not her."

"Perhaps one of her sisters would be pleasant company."

"Perhaps." The Prince sounds deflated. "I'll dance with them, I suppose. But I'll tell them they *must* bring her tomorrow night, by order of the future monarch."

"I'm sure they will love that," says the King dryly.

The Prince's footsteps draw closer. "Have you been watering the ankra lily?"

"Oh… yes."

"No, no, no!" protests the Prince. "I told you not to overwater it! Only once a week, remember?"

"Why, yes, of course. I suppose I was distracted."

"You've been behaving oddly lately," the Prince says.

"Have I? I didn't notice."

"You're avoiding me. Is it because of these confounded balls? Or the idea of me taking the crown? Do you not think I'll be a capable ruler?"

"Of course you will," replies his father. "But it's an adjustment, you know—moving into a different phase of life. I suppose I've been hanging back to allow you full freedom in this matter of choosing your bride. I'm still not sure this is the best way to do it, but—"

"It's what I wanted," finishes the Prince. "A chance to see all the eligible ladies at once, talk to them, and quickly decide which one I

want as my future companion and the mother of my heirs. I want to get it over with—there's no sense dragging it out. And I appreciate you allowing me to make my choice in this way. I know it's unconventional."

The King chuckles. "When have I ever been one for convention?"

"Not often," his son admits. "And even less so of late, if rumors around the palace are to be believed. There's talk of you missing meals, skipping important meetings, leaving your bed at night, holding impromptu court sessions for the public, and making odd judgments when they bring petitions before you. I must ask—are you quite well?"

"I've never been healthier."

"Then it must be the other thing," says the Prince tentatively. "The servants say that when you disappear, you're visiting a woman."

"That's it," says the King. "You've caught me."

"Well, who is she?"

"I can't tell you just yet. Perhaps at the feast, when you announce your bride, I will reveal my new mistress. Now why don't you head back in and enjoy the ball? Find yourself a lovely, clever wife from among the women who showed up tonight."

"Will you come with me?" asks Brantley. "I would like your opinion about a few of the girls."

"Shouldn't it be entirely your decision?"

"Yes, but you said you would give your opinion if I wished it."

"Of course, son. Allow me to tidy a few things here, and I'll join you in a moment."

"Don't delay," replies the Prince. "I need you with me in this, Father."

"And you shall have my wisdom. I'm right behind you."

The Prince's steps retreat.

As soon as Brantley closes the greenhouse door, I climb out of the bushes. "What was all that?"

"All what?" The King grabs his shirt and jacket from a peg nearby and begins putting them on.

"What he said about you disappearing often. I know about the evenings, when you and I are together, but what about all the other times?"

He works the buttons of the shirt into their holes, one by one. I wish I didn't find his masculine fingers so fascinating.

"Would you be angry if I said that I'm seeing more than one woman?" he asks.

A flood of disappointment rushes through my heart, leaving a wasteland behind. And yet I feel guilty for begrudging him a second lover, when I haven't been faithful to him, either.

"You are the King," I say quietly. "You can sleep with as many women as you like. I'm not so vain as to think I would be anyone's first and only choice."

And yet… in my memory I see Killian turning around on the stairs, and I hear him say quietly, earnestly, *It's just you*.

"Well… now you know," the King replies. "I'll understand if you'd rather not meet with me again. I wish I could stay so we could discuss it, but I must go. My son needs me. If you'd like to visit the library again, I've left the vault open for you."

"You left it *open*? Isn't that dangerous? Someone could steal the books."

"And what if they did?" He shrugs, buttoning his jacket. "Most of the information in those books is inaccurate anyway."

"I thought you hadn't read many of them."

"I really must go. It was a delight to see you, as always."

He hurries out of the greenhouse. I'm tempted to stay and stew for a while in the warmth, but I end up following him, snatching up my cloak and gloves on the way out. I walk far enough behind him to avoid his notice, but close enough so I can follow him along the garden paths and avoid getting lost again.

I hang back as he enters the rear doors of the palace, and then I go inside. I'm not used to this entry point, so it takes me a few minutes to orient myself.

When I finally enter the library, it's darker than usual, with fewer lamps on, but the vault is open and aglow, just like the King promised. I don't understand why he would keep the books hidden

away for so many years, and then suddenly leave the place wide open to whoever wants to enter. Either he's growing careless in his middle age, or he likes and trusts me more than he's ready to admit. Which means I might have a chance of triumphing over the other woman and winning his love.

Not that I want his love. A relationship with him wouldn't work—it *couldn't*. It won't, unless I can break *free.*

I spend a couple hours in the library and leave at precisely eleven-thirty. When I arrive at the bottom of the palace steps, the black carriage appears, pulled by four smoke-colored horses and driven by an illusion of a driver—a plain man in a dark coat.

When I reach home and climb the stairs to check on my stepmother, she's sound asleep. I steal another dose of contraceptive herbs, then descend to my cellar without waiting for either my stepsisters or my Faerie godfather. Despite all the worries in my head, I'm so exhausted that I fall asleep at once.

I wake up in the night to find myself dressed in a soft nightgown, with a thick blanket covering my body. Blurry with sleep, I snuggle in and doze off again.

In the morning, when my pocket watch rouses me from sleep, the conjured nightgown has vanished, but the blanket has not. It's real. And the entire cellar is not only spotless, but newly furnished. There's a sturdy chair in place of the battered one, rugs on the earthen floor, new light fixtures, and a new dresser. The cracked washstand has been mended, and it gleams like it's new. When I open the bureau, it's full of clothes that I suspect are also purchased, not conjured.

On the hook where I usually put my old nightgown, there's something hanging, wrapped in tissue paper. I rip the paper away and discover a turquoise gown studded with pearls. There's a wrap to match, but as usual, my Faerie godfather forgot the shoes. I can't help smiling to myself at the thought.

Then my smile fades, because he was in my cellar last night, sneaking around and fixing up the place. He brought me real things, and though it seems like a kindness, I can't help wondering if there are conditions attached to these gifts. He wants my body—he has

made that clear. Is he doing all this so I'll fuck him? If I keep refusing, will he insist?

The idea of him forcing me goes against everything I know of his character. But what do I *really* know? Everything he has told me, everything he has said, and everything he has done could be deception, a plot to serve some sinister purpose.

What if he isn't a benevolent godfather, but a demon who tricks people into giving their children charmed objects, only to entrap those same children later, when they're doomed and desperate?

My heart tells me none of that is true, yet my bones and flesh have had caution and suspicion beaten into them for years. Distrust is a learned behavior of mine, and it is not so easily relinquished.

# 12

No one in Eisling House knows I attended the ball last night. While my step-family eats breakfast, I listen from the kitchen, catching bits of gossip. Apparently the King made a brief appearance at the ball with his son and danced with several of the ladies, including my stepsisters.

The idea of him holding their hands and moving in rhythm with them nauseates me. My jealousy makes no sense, because I know I've had a kind of intimacy with him that they'll never know… but it still bothers me. And in the light of day, I can admit to myself that I'm dreadfully jealous of his other mistress, too. Which of us will he introduce at the Prince's engagement feast? Will I even be allowed to attend?

And then I hear Amisa say my name in what she probably thinks is a low tone. "The Prince wants us to bring Cinders tonight."

"What on earth are you talking about?" says Gilda.

"It's true," says Vashli sulkily. "He said we must make sure that our sister comes to the ball."

"This is an outrage," Gilda exclaims. "That girl was supposed to help one of you secure the Prince as a husband, not supplant you.

She isn't going, and that's final."

"But he said if we don't bring her, we can't come," whines Amisa.

"Are you sure?" asks Gilda.

Apparently the girls nod, because Gilda snarls, "That little fucking traitor. Very well. She'll go tonight. But we'll make sure she appears in such a way that the Prince won't want her. Won't we, girls?"

My stepsisters chuckle in malevolent agreement. The sound chills my spine. I have no idea what they've planned for me, and I curl my fingers around my pocket watch for reassurance.

They don't know that I have a powerful Faerie godfather on my side. Technically I can call him once more with the watch—or perhaps multiple times since he owes me a few extra favors. I'm not sure what the rules are exactly, but I know he'll come through for me. Whatever they do to me, he can fix it.

My stepmother rings for me, and when I enter the dining room, she says, "Clear away the breakfast things, Cinders. Today you'll scrub the floors, do the laundry, and prepare everything for our outing tonight. You'll be riding into the city with us. Be sure you're dressed appropriately. We'll gather in the sitting room before we leave, so I can make sure you have the correct attire. Will you be borrowing another gown from this mysterious family friend of yours?"

So she hasn't forgotten. My stomach churns with dread that she'll press the issue and force me to disclose the truth about Killian. But she questioned me just now, rather than commanding me, so I can lie to her this time. I have the space to create a false narrative that could help me shape any further truths I'm forced to reveal. I hang my head and say, "No, my father's friend doesn't want to help me anymore. I've pressed their good graces too far, borrowing the dresses and carriage."

"Of course you drove them away." My stepmother rolls her eyes. "We could have used such a connection."

I suspect she'd be angrier about it if she wasn't scheming to control the entire kingdom. With the Prince on her hook, she must

not feel the need to investigate my mysterious "friend" more deeply.

"What will you wear tonight?" asks Amisa.

"I do have a dress I was given," I say.

"By whom, pray tell?" inquires Gilda.

"Someone powerful who cares about me." The blush on my cheeks isn't a false one, and they interpret it as I hoped they would.

"The Prince," gasps Amisa. "The Prince sent you a gown?"

I nod shyly. Vashli slams down her fork and sweeps her entire place setting off the table with her arm, sending it crashing to the floor.

"Excellent." My stepmother's eyes glitter like dark gemstones. "We look forward to seeing the dress this evening."

All day, they're far crueler and more demanding than usual. Gilda is impossible to please and keeps making me redo tasks to her satisfaction. Amisa smacks my hands and face several times while I'm helping her prepare, and she complains that I smell—which is probably true, since I've been doing chores and haven't had time to bathe.

*Killian will fix it,* I whisper to myself.

Worst of all is Vashli, whom I realize is wildly in love with the Prince and hates me for stealing his heart. Her words cut the deepest.

"I don't know what you think you're doing, or what you said to my mother to convince her to let you attend those first two balls," she says, while I'm arranging her hair. "You could never be a good wife to the Prince. You're a weak-willed little slave who beats and cuts herself because she's so miserable."

I don't reply. I couldn't reveal the truth to Vashli if I wanted to.

"You're a fucking worm." My stepsister glares at my reflection in the mirror of the dressing table. "You have no backbone. You never stand up to Mother because you were born without a will of your own. You were born to be used up by people like us. You *like* being trampled and ridiculed and ruined. You're not worthy of existing, and you're certainly not worthy of Brantley. Maybe you pretend to listen to him, but you could never understand him like I do. You would make a terrible queen."

"You're probably right," I say calmly.

"Of course I'm right. I'm much smarter than you. Smarter than my selfish fucking mother and my idiot sister. I swear I will kill you before I let you be Brantley's queen. Do you hear me? I'll come down to that cellar at night and slit your damn throat. I'm not joking, Cinders."

I can tell by the blaze in her eyes that she's absolutely, murderously sincere. She's been miserable and angry her whole life, under the surface, and she has now centered all that anger and misery on me. I'm the obstacle in her path, the one thing standing between her and the life she wants. She's desperate, and I understand desperation all too well.

"I don't want the Prince," I tell her truthfully. "I don't know why he's obsessed with me—"

It's the wrong thing to say. I realize it the moment the words leave my mouth. It sounds like a boast, like I'm so charming that I captured his attention without even trying.

Vashli stands up and whirls around in one fluid motion. I don't even see the nail scissors in her hand until they're slashing across my cheek.

We stand there, facing each other, with her clutching the scissors and me pressing my fingers to the bleeding cut on my face.

"I fucking hate you," she snarls through heavy breaths.

I can sense that she's a second away from stabbing me repeatedly with those scissors, so I retreat slowly. "Amisa can finish your hair. Or you can do it yourself."

"Fuck you," she spits.

I drop the hairpins I was holding on the floor, leave the room, and descend the back stairs to the cellar. My hands are trembling as I dab a damp cloth along the cut on my cheek.

I could call the Faerie, but I can't bear for him to see me this shaken. Once I've cleaned the cut, I flee outside to feed the chickens and cows. It snowed early this morning, so I gather a handful of the fresh powder and press it to the wound on my face.

Now that it's colder, the goats are in the barn, too, especially at night. The chickens are huddled in their coop, although one of them,

an independent-minded hen I've named Ladybird, often struts around in the yard despite the cold. She and Sophie have a strange friendship where they watch each other suspiciously when they're both outside. Lord Hogmorton has his own area of the barn, with freedom to go into the yard as he wishes.

As usual, being with the animals soothes me. They each have their own personalities and their own ways of showing attachment and affection toward me. I spot Sophie stalking along a rafter in the barn with astonishing balance for such a large cat. I set down the tinned fish I brought her, and she leaps down to the barn floor swiftly, stalking up to the offering with all the dignity of a queen.

Once I'm done feeding the other animals, I stroke Merry's nose and talk to her softly for a while. I should be getting ready, but I can't bear the thought of going back into that house, so I linger until I have no choice. Then I return to the cellar, clean myself as best I can at the washstand, and put on the new underwear Killian gave me. When I take down the dress he left for me, I find a note.

*This gown was my mother's. I've tailored it to suit you, and I have no doubt your beauty will improve it. Was that a compliment? Sorry, I can't help myself. -K*

My lip wobbles, and tears pool in my eyes. I feel like crumpling to the floor and sobbing into the turquoise material, but I don't have time to let myself fall apart.

When I slip into the dress, it's a perfect fit.

My hair has natural waves, so I don't bother with curlers. I don't have time, anyway. I brush out my hair and style it simply with a few pins. It feels odd, preparing for the ball without Killian. He won't show up until my family has left, and by then I'll be gone as well.

I have no jewelry except the pocket watch. At least it's silver, a pretty piece if not a luxurious one. As usual, Killian has forgotten about shoes, so I have no choice but to use the plain leather slippers I typically wear to market. They don't look right with the dress, but thankfully the gown's hem brushes the floor, so they won't be noticeable until I start to dance.

The very idea of dancing seems dreadful when I'm in such a hopeless mood. Will the King be there tonight? Will I have a chance

to slip away from the insistent Prince? What is my stepmother planning to do? How will she make me unpalatable to him?

"Cinders! Come up to the sitting room at once," calls Gilda from somewhere above. My feet start moving toward the steps before I even fully register her words. The magic of the anklet propels me into the sitting room, where Gilda and the girls are waiting in a row. I feel rather like a condemned criminal going before a firing squad.

"That's a plainer dress than usual," sneers Amisa. "The color looks terrible on you."

Vashli says nothing, but she stares at me with murder in her eyes.

"Girls, do you have the perfume we prepared for Cinders?" asks Gilda.

Amisa sniggers and pats the little reticule hanging from her wrist. "Yes, Mother."

"Good. Don't use it until you arrive. We wouldn't want to stink up the carriage. Cinders, submit to being perfumed when the time comes."

It's a command, one I can't circumvent. *Fuck.* "Yes, my lady," I reply.

"The two of you go on out to the carriage," says Gilda, her cold gaze locked with mine. "I want a private word with Cinders."

The departure of her daughters can only mean one thing. I'm about to be punished in some terrible way that she doesn't want them to witness.

Once the front door closes, Gilda says softly, "Tear the dress. Use your nails, your strength—rip it apart until it hangs in rags."

This dress belonged to Killian's mother. It was his gift to me—a precious gift—I can't do this—

I cry out as the anklet begins to burn my skin in punishment for even that half-second of resistance. My body obeys her, my hands clutching the lovely fabric and tearing it apart. The dress is well made, so it takes effort.

*He can fix it. He can fix all of this.*

"Tear off the pearls and scatter them," orders Gilda.

My fingers find the pearls, and threads snap as I tug them free. They rain to the floor as I excoriate the dress, raking my nails over it, ruining it.

I'm crying silently. No sobs, only tears.

"Rip the skirt more," Gilda commands. "Good. Now take this." She hands me a rough, dry sponge from the kitchen. "Scour your arms and legs with that until I tell you to stop."

Teeth gritted, I rub my limbs with the harsh sponge until little dots of blood begin to rise all over my skin.

"Now rub your face with it," she says. "All over. Hard."

*Killian will fix this. He can help me.*

The sponge feels like sandpaper on my face. I don't bother pleading with her or asking her why she's making me do this. Questioning or begging always makes the punishment worse.

"Enter the ballroom several minutes after my daughters do," my stepmother says. "If anyone asks what happened to you, tell them you did this to yourself. No matter what the Prince says to you, reply to him only with insults, curses, and rude words for the entire evening. He'll think you're mad. He'll want nothing to do with you after tonight. Now stop scrubbing yourself raw. We can't have you appearing with no skin at all."

I throw down the sponge. "I hate you."

"Oh, I know you do." She smiles grimly. "You tried to outwit me, Cinders. You need to understand that this isn't a game you can win. Your fucking father may have escaped me, but you never will." She lifts my chin, inspecting the damage I've done to my face. "You'll be with me, anklet or not, until the day you die. I'll make sure of it. Now put on a cloak and go to the carriage. When you step into the ballroom, take off the cloak and reveal what lies beneath."

I don't respond. I merely obey.

Outside, the cold air bites the chafed skin of my face so painfully I want to scream. When I climb into the carriage, Amisa and Vashli stare at me. Amisa looks aghast, but Vashli gives me a slow smile of malevolent satisfaction.

"What happened to you?" exclaims Amisa.

"I did this to myself," I say mechanically.

"God, Cinders," she says, shifting away from me. "You're very disturbed, you know that?"

"No shit," I mutter.

After Gilda climbs in, Worden clucks to the horses and we begin to move.

If Worden noticed my injuries when I approached the carriage, he said nothing. I shouldn't be surprised. He has said and done nothing to help me for seventeen years. I know he relies on this job to survive, and he can't risk falling out of my stepmother's good graces—but the fact that he has never once defended me still hurts.

I sit in my personal cloud of pain, suffering in silence. I don't dare shed more tears or make a sound. Being in such close quarters with Gilda is dangerous. Even with her daughters present, there are subtle commands she could give to make my existence worse.

The carriage drops her off at a stately townhouse for her party with the other mamas. Only then do I allow myself to breathe a little more freely. But the pain is such that I don't dare shift my position, or my chafed skin will scream at me.

When we pull up in front of the palace, Worden helps the two girls out of the carriage and leaves me to get down alone. He climbs back up to his seat and drives away toward the lawn where the other carriages are parked.

"Now for your perfume," says Amisa, with less enthusiasm than she showed earlier. She removes a tiny bottle of brownish liquid from her reticule and looks down at it doubtfully. "Vashli, don't you think she'll be embarrassed enough?"

"Remember what Mother said," Vashli replies in a low tone. "We are to inform the Prince that she is deeply unwell, sick in the head. That's why she stayed home last night. We didn't want to bring her tonight, since she is in the middle of an episode, but we obeyed his command. We have to sell the idea that she is mad, so she needs to smell like she soiled herself."

"But…" Amisa hesitates, wincing.

"Give it to me." Vashli snatches the bottle and sprays me liberally with liquid that smells like horse-shit. "There. It's done. Cinders, are you wearing that ugly watch around your neck?"

"Yes," I say tightly.

"Wait ten minutes and then follow us." She turns away, drawing Amisa with her. Amisa glances back over her shoulder, and for the first time in her life, she looks both regretful and sympathetic.

Maybe there's hope for her yet.

A couple of the footmen posted along the steps of the palace are looking at me strangely. They're too far away to smell me, and thanks to the cloak, they can't see the state of my body and my dress, but they can probably tell something's wrong with my face.

One of them looks as if he's about to move toward me, so I say loudly, "I just need a moment," and I turn aside off the central steps onto the snow-covered lawn and hurry toward the shadow of a giant evergreen bush shaped like a bear rearing up on its hind legs.

When I flip open my pocket watch, it's easy to spill a few tears on the face. I smear them around with a fingertip and whisper, "Killian. Please."

I don't want him to see me like this. But I refuse to attend the ball with my skin raw and my dress in rags, smelling like excrement. Gilda never said that I had to enter the ballroom in this exact state—only that I must enter it several minutes after her daughters. She did command me to be rude to the Prince, though, which is a problem I'll need to resolve once my appearance is taken care of.

I move around the bush until I'm shielded from the view of the footmen and guards. The moon is full and bright tonight, glowing on the new-fallen snow. If I weren't so distraught, it would be beautiful.

A tall, slender male figure emerges from the darkness and strides toward me. "Celinda?"

Silently I drop the cloak and stand there exposed, my torn clothing and skin revealed by moonlight.

"Oh fuck," Killian whispers. He moves as if to hug me, but I cringe, fearful that the contact would hurt my chafed skin.

"I'll fucking kill that woman," he hisses.

"You can't, and you know it. Just help me, please."

"Yes, yes, of course." He waves his hand, and the scent surrounding my body dissipates, replaced with a floral fragrance.

The torn parts of the dress knit themselves back together, and new pearls appear to decorate the bodice, waist, and hem.

But he doesn't stop there. Magic swirls around my back and shoulders as he crafts something new—a magnificent collar of rigid, sparkling lace that branches outward from my shoulders and frames my face. My hair curls into golden ringlets, and sparkling bracelets appear along my arms. When I notice a glow behind me, I glance over my shoulder and see a pair of gauzy dragonfly wings waving at my back. They look as if they could have been fabricated by a skilled human, crafted of wire, gauze, and lace, sprinkled generously with glitter, but they move when I do, and I know their true source—the infinite artistry of my Faerie godfather's creative mind.

I hold out my foot, and he transforms my plain slippers into dancing shoes that match the turquoise dress. My pocket watch becomes a necklace, turquoise stones in a silver setting.

But my skin is still raw, and the movement of the dress against my scoured legs is intensely painful.

Killian moves nearer to me, agony on his lovely face. "Now I need to heal you."

"Please," I whisper. "And quickly. I have to go in a few minutes."

"Fuck." He tilts his forehead against mine. "I'm so angry with your stepmother… I don't think I can get hard enough to do this."

"Please." I sink to my knees in the snow and place my hand between his legs, rubbing lightly until his body begins to react. With shaking fingers I open his pants and take out his cock.

I haven't touched him like this before, yet he feels familiar. When I put him between my lips, I sigh with pleasure at the warm smoothness of him, with a touch of salty precum at the tip. For a moment, I forget about the pain coursing over my skin, and I lose myself in the pleasure of tasting him, swirling my tongue around his length, sinking him deeper into my open throat.

He moans softly, and I pull back long enough to murmur, "Sorry for using you this way."

"Don't fucking apologize," he says hoarsely. "I would give you much more of myself if you'd let me. I'd give you anything—fuck yes… just like that." He groans again, his hands sunk into my hair,

urging me to suck him faster. I bob my head on him, my tongue writhing, my cheeks sucking. Creamy vanilla explodes in my mouth, and I drink his release greedily, swallowing every drop.

I can feel the magic of his cum working already, soothing my pain, healing my torn skin. With a final firm suck to extract every bit of his release, I let him pop out of my mouth.

He staggers a little, breathing heavily as he refastens his pants. "God-stars, that was exquisite."

"I need you to do something else, if you can," I tell him. "Can you make my stepsisters and my stepmother think I'm still ragged and wounded when they see me?"

"A glamour laid upon you, just for their eyes?" he confirms, then touches both my temples and my shoulders. "It's done."

"Perfect. And then, I've also been commanded to be rude to the Prince, to deliver curses and insults whenever he speaks to me. He has been kind to me, and I believe he's a good person, so I'd rather not hurt and offend him tonight."

"Alright." He frowns thoughtfully. "Ideally we'd use a spell that makes him hear only the sweetest words, no matter what is spoken to him. I think my father has something like that in his shop, but it might take me several minutes to find it."

"Go and get it," I say. "I have to enter the ballroom now, but I'll avoid speaking with the Prince as long as I can."

He hesitates. "I suppose I could have fetched one of my father's healing candies for you, rather than coming in your mouth."

"I preferred it this way." My heart is too sore for a real smile, but I give him a tiny one. I love the way his face lights up when he sees it.

As he's turning away, I catch his hand, my eyes filling with tears of a gratitude too deep to express. "Killian, I…"

His gaze softens. "I know."

Then he's gone, and I'm walking back toward the palace entrance, drawn by the inevitable command of my wicked stepmother.

# 13

When I approach the ballroom entrance, the herald starts to lift his trumpet, then lowers it when he recognizes me. I give him a half smile. "It's alright," I tell him. "Tonight, I want to be announced."

He nods and blows an enthusiastic fanfare on his trumpet before shouting my name to the entire assembly. My stepsisters are standing together by a pillar, looking at me with a sort of eager horror. To their eyes, I'm still wrecked and ruined, injured and reeking of shit. So I'm sure it perplexes them when I grin in their direction and blow them a kiss before sailing into the room.

The crowd parts, creating a clear path between me and the Prince. But I don't head straight for him. Instead I turn aside to the nearest gentleman and say, "Would you dance with me?"

It's socially unacceptable for the lady to ask, but I'm the most resplendent person in the room, winged and glittering, and the young man looks so flattered I think he might faint. He manages to agree, and we begin waltzing together.

As long as I can keep dancing with other partners, I won't be put in close proximity to the Prince. I just need to stay away from him until my Faerie godfather shows up with the spell he went to

fetch. I'm not sure how he'll let me know that I'm clear to approach the Prince, but he'll figure out a way.

It's considered rude to cut in on a couple until they've danced at least half a waltz together, which gives me a little time. When the Prince starts sidling through the crowd toward me and my partner, I switch to a different man so Brantley can't cut in. I do this a few times, until Brantley begins to look very confused and perturbed.

But his confusion is nothing compared to that of my stepsisters. Vashli looks ravenous for my heart's blood, and Amisa is crying, distressed by the fact that no one else seems to notice my injuries or my torn dress. She must think the entire world has gone mad.

Brantley is watching me even as he dances with one of the guests. I can tell he's getting ready to break away from his partner and sever me from mine, so I breathe a hasty "Thank you for the dance" to the young lord holding my waist, and I spin away from him into the arms of another man.

This new partner of mine is tall and lean, dressed in a purple suit, with unruly black hair and a pair of—lavender eyes?

He grins at me, and the hand clasping my waist squeezes lightly. "You're stunning in this light."

"Another compliment," I hiss. "How careless of you. Did you get the spell?"

"I did, but give me a moment to enjoy this." The fingers of his left hand interlace with mine, and my heart does a quick palpitation in response.

"The Prince is getting agitated," I whisper. "I should go."

"Celinda." He speaks my name firmly, in a tone deeper and more forceful than any I've yet heard from him. "Let me dance with you."

"Fine," I mutter, allowing him to twirl me and then pull me close again.

He sighs and smiles as my chest brushes his. "This is perfection."

"Do you not dance with women in Faerie?" I say in an undertone.

"I do." He looks at me keenly. "You don't really mean 'dance,' do you? You want to know how many I've fucked."

"Hush!" I glance around anxiously, but no one seems to have heard his whispered profanity.

"It's fewer than you might think," he says. "Six, to be precise. I tend to get very attached to the people I sleep with—heartstrings entangled and all that—which isn't very much the fashion in Faerie, so I usually end up with those heartstrings torn to pieces."

He's still grinning, but it's a fragile smile now. The look in his eyes goes straight to my heart.

"I'm sorry," I tell him.

He tilts his head. "You really are, aren't you? You have sympathy for *me*, someone with magic and privilege far beyond anything you've known. I had a pleasant upbringing and I have a wonderful family who adores me, while you've suffered more than I can imagine. And yet *you* feel sorry for *me*, simply because I tend to give away my heart too easily and get it crushed. My darling, the things you could do with that vast well of compassion, if only you were given the chance to use it."

He twirls me again and jerks me against him, pressing me so close to his chest that I can feel his heart beating fast. He's breathing lightly, quickly, his face nearly touching mine.

And I want him to kiss me. My lips feel tantalized, tender, practically vibrating for the touch of his mouth.

But instead he whispers, "Feed him this. It will make anything you say seem charming to him."

He presses something round into my hand, then whirls me around and pushes me gently into the Prince's arms.

"There you are at last," says Brantley. "Why have you—"

But before he can say anything else, I hold up the item Killian gave me—a tiny ball of chocolate studded with peppermint chips—and I pop it into the Prince's open mouth.

Two of the guards standing by the wall stride forward, probably thinking I've poisoned him, but the Prince gestures for them to wait. They halt a few paces away while he chews the candy.

"By Fate, that's good," he says. "I usually don't enjoy sweets, but that was tasty. Not poison, I trust?"

My stepmother's command takes over my tongue, but even as cruel words escape my mouth, I realize that I can control their volume, so I keep my voice to barely a whisper. "I wish it was, you pompous bastard."

Did he hear me? Did the spell work? I hold my breath, biting my lip.

Then the Prince laughs, more heartily than he has since I met him. He waves the guards away, and they return to their posts.

"The origins of candy are quite fascinating," he says.

"Wretchedly boring, you mean." I hold my breath, but thanks to the spelled candy, he doesn't seem to notice my rude interruption.

He dances with me for the next hour, explaining the history of sweets and the process for making various types of candy, along with a detailed description of a town to the north that is well-known for its chocolate. By my stepmother's command, I'm forced to interject insults and curses as my side of the conversation, but thanks to my Faerie godfather's intervention, none of it perturbs the Prince. In fact, he seems to find me more charming than ever… which is unfortunate, because the longer I monopolize his attention, the more vicious stares I receive from some of the other women at the party.

Not everyone hates me, though. A number of the women don't seem to care whether the Prince likes them or not. They're enjoying themselves immensely with the other eligible men present, and I'm convinced more than a few marriages will be announced in the coming months.

Unfortunately, it seems as though none of those engagements will involve my stepsisters. I have no idea how they will explain tonight's events to Gilda, or what her reaction will be. When I see Gilda again, my Faerie godfather's glamour should still be in place, and should still make me appear injured and ragged to her. But tomorrow that glamour will have dissipated, and I'll look normal and whole again. No human could heal that quickly. She'll know I've had access to magic.

Added to that concern is my growing dread about her words to me earlier: that she would never let me go. I always knew she might not uphold her end of our bargain, but now she has made it clear, spoken it aloud. I have no doubt she'll carry out that threat, even if it means keeping me prisoner once she's in full control of the Prince… if she ever achieves that goal, which is looking less and less likely, as he showed no interest in my stepsisters tonight.

After dancing a while, Brantley and I leave the ballroom and stroll through the halls together. I maintain silence as much as I can, letting him pour out all the intricate knowledge stored in his mind. The longer I listen to him, the more I admire the vastness of his brain, its capacity for preserving details. He's truly brilliant and sincerely kind, if a bit awkward in social situations.

Though I don't have any romantic inclination toward the Prince, I can't help liking him and feeling a little protective over him. I'm glad he isn't interested in my stepsisters. Now that I've gotten to know him better, I couldn't bear letting him marry either Vashli or Amisa. I couldn't live with myself if I let my stepmother bind him and control him, the way I've been bound and controlled.

A servant approaches from a side hallway, intercepting us with a respectful bow. "Your Highness, my apologies for interrupting, but the lady's family is departing and would like her to join them in their carriage."

"I can send the lady home later, in one of my carriages," offers the Prince, with a glance at me.

I struggle not to respond, knowing whatever comes out of my mouth will be an insult—but I can't resist the force of my stepmother's command. "I don't want to ride in one of your ridiculous carriages, you arrogant ass."

The servant's eyes widen, but the Prince only laughs. "Very well, as you wish. But I will send a carriage for you tomorrow evening. I would like you to come early, before everyone else arrives."

"I suppose I have no choice since you're the motherfucking Crown Prince." I wince inwardly as the servant's jaw drops.

"So kind of you, my lady." The Prince bows to me, then lifts my hand and kisses it gently. He doesn't try to kiss me on the mouth,

and I realize that, despite his affinity toward me and his clear appreciation for my beauty and my gowns, he hasn't displayed any signs of sexual attraction. Perhaps he doesn't feel it as strongly as other men do, or he experiences it in a different way. Or perhaps he prefers men, and he's anxious about showing such a preference since he's expected to produce heirs.

"Have a wretched night," I mutter to him as I turn away. The servant escorts me back toward the front of the palace in stunned silence, so I venture an explanation. "The insults are part of a little game the Prince and I were playing."

"Oh," says the servant. The tension eases from his shoulders, though he still looks at me like I'm very odd indeed.

My stepsisters are already in the carriage, and when I climb inside, they both wrinkle their noses. "Ugh, Cinders, you smell wretched," complains Amisa. "How could the Prince bear it?"

"What did you do to him?" says Vashli. "Why didn't he throw you out of the palace?"

I adjust myself against the seat so as not to crush the lacy wings they cannot see. Instead of answering their questions, I stare out the carriage window, letting them work themselves into a frustrated frenzy until we stop in front of the grand townhouse where my stepmother has spent her evening.

She enters the coach wearing a smug smile and a fur coat I've never seen before. "Mother had great luck tonight, my dears," she says, chucking Vashli's chin and patting Amisa on the head. I'm surprised Vashli doesn't bite her fingers right off—she looks as if she would like to.

Clearly Gilda has enjoyed more than her fair share of wine this evening. That could work in my favor, if she's drunk enough to be happy but not so drunk as to be violent. With her, there's a tipping point.

"Oh Mother, it's dreadful," Amisa wails. "Cinders looked awful at the party, but no one seemed to care! The Prince didn't throw her out! He was supposed to be furious that she would appear in such disarray, smelling so terribly, but he never seemed to notice!"

"Didn't notice?" Gilda frowns.

"He said *nothing* to us about it," Vashli puts in. "He danced with her anyway and never asked us any questions about her mental state at all. He paid attention to no one else, just her. You promised this would work, Mother! You promised that he'd reject her! You made everything *worse*!"

My stepmother blinks, shaking her head as if she's trying to clear the wine-fog from her brain. "It's not possible. Look at her—skin chafed, dress in tatters, smelling like a barn—how could he still prefer *her*? Did you insult him, Cinders? Tell the truth."

"Many times," I reply truthfully.

"And he danced with you anyway?"

"Yes."

"Well… shit." She tugs a flask out of her reticule and sips from it. "We'll discuss it tomorrow, darlings. Let Mother have her moment. I just won myself this coat and a month's worth of money."

"Can I have new ribbons?" exclaims Amisa. "And new shoes, and a new hat—"

"You're not the only one who deserves new things," snaps Vashli.

I lean back in the corner of the carriage, watching the girls fight while my stepmother dozes off. There might be hell to pay tomorrow, but at least for tonight, I've been spared.

My only regret is that I didn't get to see the King.

# 14

The next day, I avoid my stepmother as much as possible, busying myself around the house, tending to the girls, cooking, and doing the chores. It's not difficult to stay out of her way, since she spends the whole morning in bed, sleeping off last night's overindulgence.

In the early afternoon, once she's up, I go out to shovel the front path—which is technically Worden's job, but with his poor health, I know he'll appreciate not having to do it. Besides, it gets me out of the house and away from *her*.

Or so I think, until Gilda comes down the steps wearing her new fur coat.

When I spot her out of the corner of my eye, I immediately tug my hood lower over my forehead and pull my scarf up over my nose and mouth. My cheeks are already red from the cold, and with those extra precautions, maybe she won't notice that my face has already healed. I've kept my arms and legs covered today, and although Amisa didn't notice that my face was healed, Vashli did. I shrugged off her questions, saying that I used a special cream on the abraded skin.

“Something you stole, no doubt,” she snapped, but at least she let it go. My stepmother won’t. If she notices that I’m no longer injured, she will ask questions, difficult ones that I don’t want to answer.

Gilda stands on the cleared part of the path, watching me shovel for a moment.

“What happened last night?” she says at last.

“I went to the ball. I danced with the Prince. I insulted him, as you ordered me to.”

“And yet somehow, despite your appearance, your smell, and your foul words, he is still infatuated with you. Tell me truthfully—did you give him a love potion?”

“No,” I reply. “I don’t believe those exist. If they do, I wouldn’t know where to get one.”

“Then how do you explain his obsession with you?”

“I can’t.” I scoop another shovelful of snow and toss it aside.

“Does he expect you tonight?”

“Yes. He’s sending a carriage for me. He said he wants me to arrive earlier than everyone else.”

“He plans to propose.”

“The fuck he does,” I exclaim. “He can’t believe I would make a good queen.”

“I don’t believe he’s considering the needs of the kingdom at all,” Gilda continues. “He’s looking for a partner he can endure. The ladies at the parties I’ve attended say he’s quite odd—finicky, difficult to please, prone to pontificating on dull subjects, and distressed if things aren’t done precisely as he wishes. They say most people annoy him. Except you, apparently.”

She’s quiet for a few more minutes, then says, “He won’t marry either of my daughters, nor anyone else. He wants you. Therefore he shall have you. Tonight, when he asks for your hand in marriage —”

“No, please—” I gasp.

“—I command you to accept.”

“Please, my lady. He’s a good person.”

Her eyes are slivers of black ice. "Need I remind you that this was *your* idea? You wanted to make a deal. His freedom in exchange for yours."

"I've thought better of it. He doesn't deserve this."

"Deserve?" She laughs, high and sharp. "No one deserves anything. We're all just swimming around in shit, trying to climb out of the cesspool. And if I have to push a few heads down and step on their skulls to climb higher, I will. I have plans for this fucking country. I'm going to fix it, and along the way I'm going to destroy everyone who has ever insulted or underestimated me. My daughters will marry nobles. And *you*—your fate will be decided by how well you serve me in the coming days. I command you to attend the ball tonight, to accept the Prince's proposal, and to be a docile and affectionate fiancée. Tell him nothing to deter or alarm him. Suggest a brief engagement, with the wedding in a week's time, and convince him that marrying immediately is better than waiting. Tell no living soul about my plan for the Prince."

My body quakes with rage and despair, hot breaths puffing against the weave of my scarf as the commands land on my soul, one after another, like great boulders weighing me down. But I don't protest again. If I say anything else, it will only give her ideas for more rules to impose, and the more commands bind me, the tighter the chains wrap around my mind and my heart.

"Good. You have a dress for tonight?"

She didn't demand the truth, so I leap at the chance to lie to her, to reclaim that tiny freedom. "Yes, the Prince sent another gown he wants me to wear. He told me not to destroy this one."

"He's fucking insane. He probably thinks you're as mad as he is. It's a good thing I'm going to be in control, otherwise the kingdom would be doomed." Shaking her head, my stepmother turns away and walks back into the house.

I stand alone, hollowed out by despair and by the knowledge that I did this to myself. I had a plan, and I let it go astray. If the Prince proposes tonight, I'll be trapped in this marriage, forced to watch him become Gilda's slave.

And the King—the handsome King who has been so generous to me, both with his library and his body—he will be deeply hurt. He won't understand why I would sleep with him and then marry his son. In fact, he might hate me for it. Or perhaps he'll be disgusted by the idea that his son might fuck the same pussy he fucked, and he'll forbid the wedding. That's a tiny ray of hope for the Prince, if not for me.

I can't avoid the ball. I can't stop the Prince from proposing or warn him about my family. And I still don't know how to remove the anklet. So I'm truly, terribly fucked, with no way out but to proceed through the events of the evening like an automaton designed to perform someone else's will.

Instead of making me prepare my stepsisters for the ball tonight, Gilda orders them to help each other get ready. Though she doesn't say it, I know she wants me to have plenty of time to make myself beautiful for the Prince.

Now that Gilda has devised a different method of reaching her goal, her focus has shifted from her daughters to me. They can feel the change, and they don't like it. The sounds of them slamming doors and screaming at each other upstairs are like music to my ears as I descend to my cellar.

Once alone, with the door closed, I rub the pocket watch between my thumb and fingers. I've used tears thrice to call my Faerie godfather. I'm not sure I can call him again the same way.

"Killian?" I whisper to the watch. It seems silly to talk to an inanimate object, but I know it's linked to him by magic. Maybe he can hear me.

I wait for a while, and then I decide to fix my hair myself, using the cracked mirror over the washstand. I have time before the Prince's carriage arrives. It only takes Killian a few seconds to make me a dress, so as long as he shows up before—

A heavy weight crashes onto my cot, and I spin away from the mirror to see Killian sprawled across the bed.

"What are you doing?" I exclaim in a loud whisper. "My family is home? You have to be quiet."

"Of course." He tries to push himself up, then collapses onto the thin mattress again, his cheek sunk into my pillow.

"What's wrong with you?" As I approach him, I spot dark blood trickling from beneath his coat sleeve, down his wrist and fingers, running along the hilt of a small scythe clutched in his hand—a scythe with a black blade. "Killian?"

"I got it," he slurs. "Nearly killed me, but I got it. Fucking Unseelie monsters tried to eat me."

My heart thunders as I creep closer. My stepmother has forbidden me to touch actual weapons, but a scythe is technically an implement used in farming, so I should be able to touch it without the anklet reacting.

Cautiously I place one finger on the scythe's handle. When my anklet doesn't react, I take the implement gently from Killian's hand and lay it on the floor. Then I push him over onto his back.

My stomach lurches at the sight of him. His chest has been ravaged, gnawed down until his breastbone and ribs are exposed. Deep in his body, beneath the bones and the glistening, bloody flesh, there's a faint, pulsing lavender glow, and I realize it's his heart. His heart *glows.*

"My god, Killian." I cover my mouth, fighting the urge to gag.

"Nasty, isn't it?"

"Why did you come here?" I exclaim. "I don't know how to help you—you should have gone home. Your father could fix you, right?"

"I'll heal," he says. "There's no iron involved, so the healing process won't take long. I wanted to come here at once and give it to you. Try it. See if it works."

"The scythe?" I ask. "Is it the Wraith's Scythe?"

"Yes."

"But you said it was deep in Unseelie territory, that you couldn't access it without putting yourself in great danger."

"Clearly." He attempts a roguish grin and gestures to his torn body. His breaths are labored and wet, his voice half-choked. "I may have started a war without really meaning to… but that's for King Lirannon to handle. We've had peace for too long anyway. He could use a little unrest to spice up his life."

"You idiot," I whisper. "You half-killed yourself to get this for me?"

"After what she did to you last night, you bet I fucking did." His lips tremble, fervent emotion blazing in his eyes even as they glimmer with tears. "You're worth it."

"Stop," I whisper. "You're going to make *me* cry, too."

"Just try the scythe. Please."

"Alright." Whisking away the tears with the back of my wrist, I pick up the scythe and sit down in the new chair he gave me. "I just—cut the anklet?"

"Try to cut it. If it doesn't work for you, I'll try."

I attempt to saw through the anklet. The scythe makes a small scratch on the charmed metal, and at first I'm hopeful, but after a few seconds, the scratch disappears, as if the anklet healed itself. I scoot over to Killian and let him try, but the scythe doesn't perform any better for him.

"Well, fuck." He lets it fall and lies still, staring up at the ceiling of the cellar. Tears slip from the corners of his eyes.

I reach out and stroke the loose waves of purple hair back from his forehead. I want to tell him about my stepmother's plan to have me marry the Prince and transfer the anklet, but she ordered me not to speak of it to any living soul. Maybe he'll figure it out on his own. Maybe, once the transfer is complete, Killian can save me from my stepmother, and then we can figure out a way to save the Prince, too.

Or maybe my stepmother will kill me on the night of my wedding, and all this will be over.

Once, not so long ago, death might have sounded like relief, like the sweet end to a bitter struggle—but now, I can't bear the thought of my life being cut short. In one  week, I've gained three people in my life whom I care about—the Prince, his gorgeous father, and the sweet Faerie who is currently bleeding all over my bed.

"There are things humans can do to help Faeries heal," Killian murmurs.

I sigh. "Why do I suspect those things have to do with sex?"

"Because you're as smart as you are beautiful."

"That's two compliments in one, motherfucker." I lean down and press my lips to his.

His mouth is warm, mostly smooth but sticky at one corner with his blood. At first, kissing him is a comforting pleasure, like sunbathing on a warm rock, or snuggling a soft cat, or sinking into a hot bath. But the intimacy of it heats inside me, building until the act moves beyond comfort into something more urgent—a twining of wet tongues, a melting glory of liquid heat and soft mouths.

His bloodied hand comes up and cups the back of my head, deepening the kiss. I lash my tongue inside his mouth, suddenly desperate to explore him.

A guilty voice speaks in the back of my mind, shaming me for doing this when a large piece of my heart belongs to the King. But I need solace, and Killian needs healing, and *fuck it.*

Reluctantly I end the kiss. "Will it hurt you, if I—" Lightly I touch between his legs. His body seems undamaged below the waist, but I want to be sure I don't cause him worse agony.

"Do anything you want to me," he says desperately. "Please."

I loosen his pants and drag them down to his thighs, exposing his pretty cock. Then I slip off my work dress and my underthings, and I arrange myself astride him on the bed.

He watches me with a look of mingled anguish and awe, as if he can't believe what's happening. I stay up on my knees at first and tease myself with the tip of his cock, letting him watch as I use it to manipulate my clit. Then I tuck him inside me and slide all the way down.

He cries out, and I have to lean forward quickly and clap a hand over his mouth. "Sshh, pretty Faerie," I whisper. I move my hips up and down, using my thigh muscles so I can fuck myself on him faster. I try not to think about how I did this with the King in the greenhouse. I try not to think about my stepmother, or the Prince, or the anklet, or anything else. I blot out every other thought and focus solely on the fullness of him gliding inside me, his lips warm against my palm, his eyes rolling back with agonized bliss.

He comes before I do, whimpering against my palm, groans quaking from his ruined chest. I keep riding him toward my climax,

and as I do, I notice that he's healing. Torn tissue is knitting back together even as I watch.

I did that. I helped him. The knowledge rushes through me in a burst of emotion I can't describe, and I come on his cock, throbbing with ecstasy. I remove my hand from his mouth and lean back, pressing my fingertips to my clit to coax out every bit of pleasure.

"I love watching you come," Killian whispers.

I smile at him. "After everything you've done for me, I'm happy to do a favor for you."

"A favor?" His eyes harden slightly.

"Of course." I climb off him and fetch a cloth from the washstand to clean myself up.

"Right," he says. "That's what it was—a favor. One good turn deserves another, fair is fair, and all that." There's a noticeable edge to his tone.

"You're angry?" I frown. "I helped you heal. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing at all." He sits up and smiles, bright and brittle. "My energy is a bit low at the moment, but I assume you want me to make you a gown?"

"If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble. It's my *duty*, after all. Part of our business arrangement." He's still smiling, but I hate this smile. It's like I've broken something inside him.

"I didn't mean to upset you," I venture.

"No one is upset, darling. Hold still. I'm going to do a bit of blood magic. Two birds with one stone—a clean room and a new dress, and it will cost me less energy." He makes a circular gesture, and all the blood from his clothes, the bed, and the floor lifts up and whirls around in a tornado of scarlet drops, expanding into a red cloud before condensing around my body in the form of a velvety crimson gown. My pocket watch transforms into a ruby pendant, and when I turn to look in the mirror over the washstand, I can see more rubies winking from the pile of golden braids on my head.

"It's gorgeous," I breathe, even though I'm a little concerned about the fact that he literally used his blood to make the gown.

"And… shoes?" But even as I speak, shoes are forming around my feet. I lift the gown to look at them. "These look as if they're made of glass."

"Crystallized air, actually. Like the mirror I made for you."

"And they'll be all right for walking and dancing?"

"Trust me, they're quite comfortable."

"Since you applied the glamour earlier than usual, do I need to leave the ball by eleven instead of midnight?"

He shakes his head. "Since I used my own blood, it should last a bit longer. You can leave when the clock strikes twelve. Now if you don't mind, I must be off. I need to rest." He picks up the scythe, twirls it around a few times, then fashions a portal out of thin air and walks out of my sight.

I stand there, twisting my hands together, wishing he'd stayed a moment longer. I know I hurt him when I said I only fucked him as a favor. He wanted it to be more than that. But how much more? Anything he might want from me is more than I can give. I am not my own, so how can I give myself fully to anyone?

"Cinders!" Amisa bawls down the stairs. "The Prince's carriage is here!"

"What a very ladylike way to inform me," I mutter as I mount the steps.

My stepmother and Amisa are waiting in the hallway. "Vashli is crying in her room and it's your fault," says Amisa. Once again, I think about how she often sounds like a petulant child, like a girl half her age. But at least she's feeling some measure of sympathy for her sister.

Gilda says nothing to me. She has already delivered her orders. But she and Amisa watch me from the doorway of the house as I descend the steps in my scarlet gown.

Killian didn't make me a wrap this time. I don't mind—he was exhausted, still healing, and hurt by my words. But it's cold, and I shiver a little as I traverse the path I shoveled earlier. My breath creates puffs of pale smoke in the air.

The Prince's carriage is warm, though, thanks to a small heater full of hot coals under the carriage seat. It's protected by a sort of

cage to let the warmth out while preventing wayward skirts from getting too close to the heat.

When we arrive at the palace, I'm greeted by a pair of attentive footmen and escorted inside. I thought the palace might feel quiet and empty, but there's a flurry of activity as the servants prepare for yet another ball—the last one. One of the footmen escorts me to the left, down a hallway I haven't followed before.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"The family's private dining room."

"But I'm dressed for a ball, not for dinner."

"They will not mind, my lady. And we will provide a covering to protect your gown if you desire it." He bows, ushering me through a doorway. "Welcome."

I step inside and, to my horror, see both the Prince and the King standing behind ornate chairs, waiting for me.

The King looks more deliciously handsome than ever in a smoky gray suit and a white silk cravat. His silver eyes, shaded by those dark brows, meet mine with an intensity that sends my stomach flying into some distant universe. His beautiful lips curve slightly, the ghost of a smile.

How can he smile when we're in this situation? How can he stand there, knowing me as intimately as he does, knowing also that his son is probably going to propose before the end of the night?

"Welcome, Celinda," says the King in that rich, deep voice, and I glance around despairingly, certain that I'm going to pass out from sheer panic. None of the servants are close enough to catch me.

The King jerks his head slightly, and Brantley hurries to pull out my chair for me himself, rather than having one of the servants do it. I drop gratefully onto the cushioned seat and try to remember my manners. I didn't curtsy, but I'm sure neither of them will mention it. Thank Fate my stepmother's order from last night no longer applies, so I don't have to listen to rude phrases spilling from my mouth without my consent.

"Thank you for having me," I say as calmly as I can manage.

"We're having roast duck," says the Prince eagerly. "My favorite. But first, an autumn soup, very light and foamy. I think you'll enjoy

it, though the primary ingredient is the humble squash. So many kinds of squash, you know, and so much that can be done with them."

He launches into a lesson on the types of squash and their uses, including whole recipes complete with the quantities of each ingredient. One of the servants approaches and offers me a sort of bib that I can drape over my gown, but I decline, not wishing to look even more foolish before the two royals. When the soup arrives, I do spill a few drops on my dress, but the material absorbs it instantly, leaving no stain.

I could get used to wearing magical clothing.

When the Prince pauses for breath and a mouthful of soup, I smile at him and say, "It's incredible how you can remember all those recipes. I've never met anyone with such a wonderful memory."

"Thank you." His smile is so delighted and genuine that warmth floods my heart.

I truly care about Brantley. I want him to be safe and happy. I want him to have a partner who appreciates his strengths and complements his weaknesses. Maybe, if I'm forced into the role of his wife, I will find some way to bear it—to help him govern and free us both from my stepmother.

But then I glance at the King, and my heart breaks. He's smiling too, looking at me with so much affection and appreciation for my kindness to his son that nausea surges in my stomach.

I can't do this. I can't be married to his son, be part of his family, and move in the same circles as him. Much as I might try to resist him, I will fall at his feet again. I know it.

How did my life become such a tangled mess?

It's all *her*, of course. My fucking stepmother. Without her, none of this would have happened.

"Are you well, my dear?" asks the King. "You look a bit pale."

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Excellent. Tell me about your family."

He's behaving like any father would when his grown son brings a potential bride to the family dinner table. He's acting as if he

doesn’t know me, as if his tongue hasn’t been inside me. I can still feel the brush of his scruff on my inner thighs, and I pin my legs together under the table.

I do my best to tell him about my family, but my stepmother has surrounded that topic with so many rules and laws that I find myself pausing constantly to skirt around things I’m not allowed to mention. At last I manage to turn the topic back to food, specifically the best ways to cook different cuts of meat, a topic which allows Brantley to exercise both his memory and his love of detail.

At last, after thin slices of chocolate cake, the King rises. “We should prepare for the ball. I’ll be attending tonight, and Brantley, if you will permit it, I would like to claim one dance with Celinda.”

“Of course, Father,” replies the Prince. There’s not a trace of suspicion in his face or voice. I suspect that despite Brantley’s expertise in everything else, he’s not good at reading expressions, or he would have picked up on the meaning of my blushes and discomfort during dinner.

“Celinda, there’s a chamber prepared for you upstairs if you need to freshen up before the ball,” the King says. “I’ll escort you there, if you like.”

I should say no. But I want to speak with him, to question him about what the fuck he’s doing and how we’ll manage to stay away from each other if I’m married to his son. So against my better judgment I hear myself saying, “That would be lovely, thank you.”

I don’t miss the way the King waves off the guards who try to follow us, or the way his large hand presses lightly at the small of my back on the way upstairs. The hallway is cloaked in beautiful paper, vines and flowers swirling over the walls. The lamps are shaped like hands holding glass flames.

The King opens a door and beckons me inside. I enter, my mouth and throat dry as bone despite the water I drank at dinner. Did I eat more than a few bites? I can’t remember. My stomach is twisting itself into knots.

The door clicks shut behind me, and I spin around, hoping he left, hoping I’ll be alone.

But he's there, in the room with me, his fingers still on the door handle. He's looking at me like a beast who has finally cornered his prey.

"Kneel before your King, Celinda," he says quietly.

"Your Majesty, we should talk."

He's taking off his belt. I can't tear my gaze away from those large, masculine hands. I watch him undo his pants, and I melt to the ground in my scarlet dress. Fuck him… I can't resist.

"Don't come on my dress this time," I whisper. "I'll swallow it."

He hesitates, a faint alarm in his eyes. Then he puts himself away and grabs the belt from the bed, putting it back on. "We can't do this. Not now."

Disappointed, I frown. "How responsible of you."

"I simply realized that as much as I want to make a mess of you, I should wait until after the ball."

"Until I'm engaged to your son?" I get to my feet, desperation in my voice.

"He may ask you," says the King. "You do not have to accept."

I turn away, silent, unable to explain that I have no choice.

"Unless…" he hesitates. "Unless you *do* plan to accept."

I can't reply. Anything I might want to say falls under the restriction of my stepmother's command.

"I see." His voice is distant, cold. "Then I will leave you to prepare for the ball. You and I will dance, and after that, we will be nothing to each other except polite acquaintances, and eventually, relatives. You will be my… daughter."

I want to scream, *Fuck that*, but I can only stand motionless, voiceless. The King releases a heavy sigh, looking so utterly weary that for the first time, I can see his true age. It hurts that the idea of losing me brought out that distant shadow of death in him, and before I can think better of it I leap forward, flinging my arms around his neck and sealing my lips to that gorgeous mouth of his.

He wraps both arms around me, and it feels right. It feels perfect. *Here is strength and shelter, passion and purpose. Here I am safe and desired.*

"Your friend," he murmurs, still kissing me. "The one for whom you were searching the Faerie spellbooks…"

"Never mind that right now." I kiss him again, and he opens for my tongue. I've kissed him before, but never this deeply. And yet, the inside of his mouth feels familiar. Slowly I trace the shape of his teeth, uncertainty tugging at my consciousness.

He breaks the kiss abruptly, backs away, and leaves the room with a curt, "Goodbye."

Incensed, I fume for a second, then yank the door open, determined to call him back. But he's gone. He must have run down the hallway out of sight, desperate to escape. Even though I'm angry, I don't blame him.

I use the guest bathroom, then look at myself in the huge gilded mirror above the porcelain sink. No need to make use of the available cosmetics—the Faerie godfather lightly enhanced my natural beauty, as usual, and the glamour remains in place. I wait a little longer, peering through the drapes of the large bedroom window, watching the carriages come and go as guests arrive for the ball. At last, I take several long breaths, steeling myself for what's to come, and I open the door.

# 15

The ballroom is aglow with lights, resplendent with people dressed in their finest clothes. The ladies have outdone themselves on this final night, determined to make the most of their last chance to impress the Prince.

And yet I still stand out, clad in a ballgown crafted from a Faerie's blood, with crimson jewels shining at my throat and in my hair.

Brantley looks at me from across the room, and his face lights up as if I'm an oasis in a stormy sea… a safe place for him. I love that, and yet a dark thrill runs through me when the broad figure of the King eclipses my view of the Prince.

"I believe I requested a dance," the King says, low.

"Indeed you did."

A muscle tightens along his jaw as he places a hand at my waist and laces his fingers with mine. "We'll call it a farewell dance."

There's something intimate, easy, and familiar about the way he dances with me… as if we've danced before. As if we were meant to be each other's dance partners.

He twirls me and then pulls me close, holding me against his body. The smooth grace of the move is familiar.

Too fucking familiar.

My breath stalls in my lungs. Hot panic breaks out over my skin, yet my heart and my blood go ice-cold.

I keep moving. Keep smiling. Keep dancing, even as my brain races, seeking confirmation. If I'm going to verbalize my suspicion, even to myself, I need proof first.

In the most casual tone I can muster, I say, "You were right. The shoes are quite comfortable."

The King smiles. "I told you they would be."

And then his face changes. Freezes in an expression of horror as he realizes that he's been caught.

A silent scream throbs in my throat, and my teeth clench until they hurt. Savagely I try to push him away, but he grabs me in an iron grip and dances me through the crowd toward an arched doorway, while I struggle against him.

"Stop it, Sin," he whispers harshly. "Not here."

I almost don't care if anyone sees the scene I'm about to make. But causing a disturbance would contradict my stepmother's directive that I mustn't do anything to deter the Prince from proposing. The anklet will interfere if I try to have this argument in the ballroom. I might as well go with him.

He hurries me up a narrow back staircase, down a side passage, then into a silent, empty parlor. Through glass doors, there's a balcony twined with winter roses, their petals silvered with moonlight.

I spin around to face the King. He presses the button on the wall, and two small lamps come to life, bathing the room in an amber glow.

My fists are clenched, my body shaking. "Drop the glamour."

The shift is seamless, from the form of the King to his true form. Killian folds his arms and faces me, looking both rebellious and repentant.

I knew the truth, and yet seeing it quakes the very foundations of my heart.

"How long have you been pretending to be the King?" My voice is breathless and quivering, on the verge of tears.

"Since we first met in the library."

"You mean…" I take a shuddering breath. "The whole time?"

"Yes."

"Where is the King? Did you kill him?"

"The King died in the library on the night of the first ball," Killian says. "His heart failed him. I had glamoured myself as a servant so I could keep an eye on you during the party, and I was passing the library when it happened. He'd slipped away from his bodyguards, so I was the only one within earshot at the time. When I reached him, his spirit was already gone."

"So you decided to *become* him?"

"Well, yes. I thought it would be a pity if the ball had to be canceled. You were so eager to attend, and I had dressed you so beautifully. I decided to assume the King's form, his scent, and his voice. My plan was to put him in his bed later that night, so his servants could find him in the morning. I laid a preservation spell on his body and stuffed him inside the bench seat in one of the reading nooks. Actually it's the one where you found me."

Something in his tone sends a jolt of dread through my gut. "Killian… tell me he's not still in there."

Killian gives me a shamefaced smile.

"Oh gods, I'm going to be sick." I grip the back of a chair and bend over, trying to get a deep breath.

"I only planned for the deception to last one night," he says. "But then you seduced me while I was glamoured as the King, and I went along with it, to my own shame. I should have told you everything, but you already seemed very distrustful of me… I thought if you discovered the truth, you might refuse my help, which you so obviously needed. So after the initial ball, I continued the ruse, which proved difficult, especially since I had to be an actual ruler during the day. It's not an easy job."

"You think I care how *difficult* it was for you?" I exclaim. "Is that why you kept sleeping with me? To ease the hardship of acting like the King? Or was it for your own sick amusement?"

Pain and penitence battle in his eyes. "That was… fuck, it wasn't planned, I swear. I never expected you to be so… enthusiastic. If you recall, on that first night, I asked if you were seducing me only because I was the King. I asked if a different face or a different body would do just as well for you, and you said yes. You seemed to *need* sex, and I gave it to you gladly."

Hot blood rushes to my face, a tidal wave of shame. He's right… I was ridiculously eager to be carried away on a flood of passion. When I think about how quickly I fell for the man I thought was the King, the father of the Prince I was supposed to be courting…

I turn away from Killian, both hands covering my face.

"Fuck you," I whisper.

I can't stay in this room. My whole body is burning with regret, with shock, and the cold air outside looks like relief. I cross the room to the glass doors, fling them open, and rush onto the balcony, splaying my hands over the icy stone of the balustrade.

I hear Killian's steps behind me. Of course he can't just leave me alone.

"You think I despise you for needing comfort? For craving physical affection so badly?" His voice has changed—it's deeper now, thrumming with a regal force I recognize. "I fucking loved it, Sin. That first night surprised me, I'll admit. But from that moment on, I was addicted. I couldn't stop. I swear I couldn't. Fuck, I salivated for your cunt every time I heard you *breathe*. I was instantly hard every time I saw you. I wanted to tell you about the ruse—I swear I planned to, but I was so damn weak. I wanted more. I couldn't give you up."

My fingers curl around the vines of the winter roses, heedless of the thorns piercing my flesh. The unmistakable passion of his confession soothes my injured pride a little, but I still can't excuse what he did. There are so many conversations I have to replay in my mind now. Did he mean everything he said? How much of it was sincere, and how much was him saying what he thought the King might say?

"Celinda," he murmurs, right behind me. "The Fae don't typically apologize, but my father taught me to own up to my mistakes. It

was wicked and selfish of me to deceive you, and I'm truly sorry for it. I'm begging you to do the impossible, and forgive me."

"How can I? When you lied to me, deceived me, tricked me…"

"I wanted you to be happy. I wanted to save you."

"Well, you haven't. You can't. You hurt me instead, and I hate you for it." My sobs are violent now, bursting through between my words. "You've ruined everything. Stolen all the joy from this week. What I thought I had with the King is gone, what I might have had with you is over, and it's all misery from now on, because—" I stop short, unable to tell him my stepmother's scheme.

"I'm sorry," he repeats helplessly. "I thought I could make it up to you if I managed to free you. But the scythe was my last idea, and it didn't work. I'll think of something else, though, I swear."

Whatever scheme he concocts, it won't be soon enough. I must accept the Prince's proposal tonight and marry him in a week. Then Brantley will wear the anklet, and I will be killed or entrapped some other way, still bound to my stepmother.

If I could tell him those things, perhaps we could design a plan together. But I can say nothing about any of it. I can only stare at him and try to reconcile the fact that the handsome King and my Faerie godfather are one and the same.

Killian cautiously reaches for me, and when I don't protest, he cups my shoulders with his long, warm fingers.

"Your stepmother is planning for you to marry the Prince, isn't she?" he says. "And then she'll put the anklet on him. Which means you'll be free, though judging by the despair in your eyes, I would guess she has threatened you with further torment, confinement, or death."

I can't speak, partly because of the anklet, and partly from sheer astonishment.

He smiles a little. "Don't look at me as if I'm clever. Her next move was fairly obvious. And I would also guess that you're feeling wretched about the Prince assuming the burden you've borne all your life. He's a good man, that one. In the course of pretending to be his father, I've gotten to know him a bit, and I like him. Trust me

when I tell you, Sin—I'll find a way to save you both. I'm your secret weapon, darling."

To my surprise, a smile twitches the corner of my mouth. It's not that I've forgiven him—it's merely a symptom of hope. Hope, which like an incurable disease, seems to have reappeared in my heart again at those words.

"I could ask my parents for help, as a last resort," he says. "But they have their own responsibilities and their own limits. It's especially risky for my mother to return to this realm for more than a few minutes, since she hasn't traveled between worlds in so long. I've already consulted with several Fae about your anklet, but none of them know where it's from or how to remove it. Nevertheless, I will think of nothing else until I solve this problem. This I vow, Celinda. And I beg for your mercy."

He sinks to his knees before me, clutching the skirt of my gown—the gown made from his own blood, spilled when he went alone into dangerous territory to fetch the Wraith's Scythe.

I look at him kneeling there, utterly devoted and repentant. And yet… is he truly sorry for the deception, or is he only sorry that I discovered it?

"I was right to fear magic, and to distrust magical beings," I say quietly. "You've proved that every cautious instinct I had was correct. You're asking for something I can't give you—mercy and forgiveness. I haven't had the time to process any of this, so I can't offer either one."

He nods and pulls back. When I see his lashes sparkling with tears, I almost yield. I almost kneel down with him, take him in my arms, and comfort him. But I can't allow myself to ease his pain yet. It's well-deserved, and I have to think of myself and my own dignity.

"Forgiveness is something you can earn from me," I say.

"I will." He looks up, his beautiful face stricken with agony and hope. "I will do anything you ask, for as long as I live."

Alarm flares in my heart at those words. "I would never require that of you."

"I know," he replies. "I yield my will freely. I am yours to command."

"You don't have to do that as some sort of atonement for the lies," I protest.

He smiles, a sweet madness in his gaze. "This isn't atonement. This is depraved obsession, abject devotion, and consuming passion."

My breath catches as I realize what he's saying.

So *this* is love. It's far more dangerous than I imagined.

"I hate you for deceiving me." The words aren't nearly as caustic as I meant them to be.

"You have every right to hate me," he replies.

"I'm disappointed that I didn't actually seduce a King."

"That's fair."

"I understand now why you wouldn't come in my mouth as the King. I would have recognized the way you taste."

Heat burns in his lavender eyes. "Yes."

Though I'm furious with him, my anger doesn't carry the same poison of bitterness and resentment that I feel when I think of my stepmother. He behaved badly, yet his motives weren't entirely selfish. He craved not just our physical connection, but my comfort, safety, and happiness.

I'm torn—horribly, wretchedly torn—between wanting to drive a dagger into his perfect chest and wanting to ride his face while he writes his apology on my clit with his tongue.

"You need to stop being so fucking beautiful," I tell him firmly. "And you need to get out of my sight and give me time to process all this. Go be the King again, before someone comes looking for you."

"The servants and guards are *always* hovering." He gets to his feet and brushes off his suit. "It's dreadfully annoying."

"Poor little lying bastard," I say derisively. "Go and suffer. I'll return to the ballroom when I'm ready."

After he leaves, I don't cry anymore. I take a few minutes to breathe. To understand that the King is dead, a fact that will soon have to be revealed to the kingdom. To comprehend that within the hour, I will likely be engaged to the Crown Prince who doesn't yet realize that he is, in fact, the new ruler of the land. To understand that my Faerie godfather is madly in love with me… and that he

began our relationship with an inexcusable deception. To absorb the fact that he's determined to save me, and not only me, but Brantley as well.

I'm used to coping with disappointment and misery. I'm not quite as adept at managing fear alongside hope, or holding space for both anger and love.

But I have always lived with uncertainty, and I've always found a place within myself where I can be safe and strong, no matter what commands bind me or what abuse I'm forced to endure. I can't deny that since Killian came into my life, it has been better, not worse. I have smiled more in these few days of knowing him, both as the King and as himself, than I have for *years*.

I refuse to forgive him so quickly. And yet I fear that somewhere deep in my heart, I already have.

When I return to the ballroom, the Prince is quick to find me. I try to focus on him, though I glimpse the King—Killian—dancing with Vashli across the room.

"There you are," Brantley says, pulling me aside rather than leading me out among the other dancers. "I wonder if you'd come with me into the garden. Do you have a wrap?"

"Not tonight," I admit.

"I'll have someone fetch you a coat." He leads me into the front hall and speaks to a servant, who disappears for a moment and returns with a fur-trimmed jacket cut short enough to accommodate my voluminous skirts. The servant hands me gloves for my hands as well.

My nerves tighten as Brantley escorts me outside into the snowy garden. It's not hard to guess what he's up to. This is the moment I've been expecting—dreadful yet inevitable.

He faces me, then reaches stiffly for my hand. "Celinda, I have enjoyed your company very much these past few days."

"I've enjoyed yours as well, Your Highness."

"I believe you have the temperament, the kindness, and the intelligence I am looking for in my future Queen. Therefore I would like to ask if you will accept my hand in marriage. Will you be my wife, and one day take the throne at my side?"

I want to ask him if he has really thought about this, if this is an emotionless, practical choice or if he has considered the true wishes of his own heart. But my stepmother's command won't allow any such discussion, and I hear myself saying, in a cool voice that doesn't sound like mine, "I accept. But I have one request."

"And what is that?" he replies.

"I would like to marry one week from today. Why should we delay our partnership? The sooner we are married, the sooner we can begin working as a team."

"That is a splendid idea," he says. "I believe that once a decision is made, it should be carried out promptly. In this we are aligned, as I'm sure we shall be on everything else."

Despondent though I am for his sake, I can't help smiling a little. It's just like him to see the logic and expediency of a quick marriage rather than a lengthy engagement. He has made his choice—why should he waste any more time?

He reaches into his pocket and produces a heavy gold ring with a vivid blue stone at the center. "This was my mother's ring. I would give it to you now, but the engagement is supposed to be a secret until the feast tomorrow night. So I will present it to you then, if you're agreeable."

"Of course," I reply. As my stepmother ordered, I will be the most docile and agreeable fiancée he could imagine.

The Prince doesn't try to kiss me. I don't think the idea enters his mind at all. He simply tucks the ring back into his pocket, and we return to the ballroom to dance and converse. He doesn't drink, but he fetches me wine at my request. I gulp it down, convinced it's the best way to get through the evening.

The wine makes me feel warm, comfortable, and far less worried, so a little later I indulge in a second glass. Then, while Brantley is dancing with another guest, I sneak a third glass from a butler's tray.

A low voice at my side suggests, "Perhaps you should switch to water. Or coffee."

"Fuck coffee, and fuck you," I mutter.

The King chuckles, the sound deep and resonant and alluring.

"Now you see, that's what makes me angry." I poke his broad chest with my finger. "I love that laugh. But it's not *real*. It's all fake."

"Keep your voice down," he advises. "You do realize I can glamour myself to look, sound, and smell like this anytime. I can be anyone you want."

"I want *truth*." The word truth feels strange and thick on my tongue. "Tell me, Your Majesty, am I drunk?"

"Very much so."

"I've never been drunk. I've never had this much wine. I'm not allowed to drink any of Milady Stepmother's stash."

"You need to come with me, Celinda. Quickly and quietly. It's nearly midnight."

"Wouldn't that be a sight?" A laugh bubbles up in my throat. "Me dancing naked in the ballroom?" Not that my anklet would allow it. That kind of embarrassment doesn't fit with my stepmother's directive that I perform like a proper fiancée. "I suppose I'd better go," I admit.

"Indeed. I don't think anyone has noticed your state of mind yet, but they will if we don't leave now. Come along, we'll step out this way."

He guides me behind a large pillar, then over to the same side door we used earlier.

"We need to find a place where I can create a portal," Killian says.

As we hurry up the stairs, with him supporting me, the clock begins to strike twelve.

"How long do I have before I'm naked?" I ask.

"I'm not sure. Blood magic can be unpredictable."

"Especially when it's *your* treacherous blood." I laugh and stumble into him.

"Try to walk straight, for fuck's sake." His glamour flickers momentarily, showing his true form. "Shit. I've been holding my own glamour for too long… I can't keep it up."

"Can you still make a portal?"

"Yes. Fortunately my ability to portal is a separate gift, and doesn't require the same type of energy."

As the air shimmers and the portal forms, we both hear voices from the end of the hall. Killian grabs me and we leap through together.

We tumble into the cellar of Eisling House, not a moment too soon, because Killian has reverted to his usual form, and I'm completely naked.

He's on top of me, his thigh between my legs.

I blame the wine and its warmth for what I do next.

I arch my spine, rubbing against his thigh like a cat in heat.

Killian looks down at me, but he doesn't move.

The wine softened everything I was feeling and made warmth bloom over my skin. But deep in my heart, there's a soreness it can't relieve. Lately I've been finding comfort in sex, soothing myself by having trysts with beautiful men. Even though those two men have coalesced into one Faerie who deceived me, I've formed an attachment. Killian is a habit of mine, in either of his forms. He represents help, kindness, freedom, and pleasure. Now that the wine has dulled the edge of my anger, I'm less inclined to stab him and more inclined to use him for comfort.

I rub myself against his thigh again. Still braced over me, he bites his lip and looks away.

"Come on," I whisper. "You said you crave me, that you're obsessed. Put your cock inside me right now. Fill me up with your cum, like you did when you were playing king."

"You're drunk," he says. "I won't touch you when you're drunk."

"But you touched me while wearing another face."

"It's not the same thing, Sin. You know that. You were fully in control of yourself then, and now you're not."

I hear what he's saying, but my mind is too blurry to fully comprehend what he means. All I know is that my body is trembling with arousal, and I need him. I clutch his arms, trying to pull him closer. "Please, Killian."

"You would never do this sober," he replies, pulling away. "Not after what I did. Not when you're so angry with me."

He climbs off me and walks a few steps away.

I get to my feet unsteadily. "Killian, please look at me."

He gives my nude form a cautious sidelong glance, his throat bobbing as he swallows.

"Don't you want me?" I say softly. "I'll lie right here on the bed, just like this." I lay back, arch my knees, and move my legs wide apart. With my fingers I spread open my pussy for him so he can see the glistening wetness. "Please come here. I'm hurting. *You* hurt me, and I need to feel better. You can come inside me, right here."

"Oh fuck." He turns away again, one hand over his mouth. "This is the torture I deserve."

"Please." Tears trickle from my eyes because I just *want* him, I want to be held, I want him inside me, wrapped around me. "Please fuck me."

"No!" he barks out, despair in his voice. "No, I won't touch you tonight. I have to go."

"Where?"

"Anywhere else."

I sit up, but the room pitches and warps so much I have to lie down again before I get sick. "I'm begging you, Killian. Lie down with me."

He walks over to me, his jaw clenched, and for a second I think he's going to relent. But he only pulls the blanket over my body and bends to plant a burning kiss on my forehead.

"If I stay, I will fuck you," he whispers. "So I'm going to do both of us a favor, and not add this to my list of sins."

More hot tears spill down my cheeks. "If you leave me now, don't speak to me or touch me again, ever. I don't want your favors or your help."

"Go to sleep, Celinda." He looks at me for a tortured moment, desire and guilt warring on his face. Then he creates a portal, little more than a flicker in the air, and disappears.

# 16

Killian doesn't appear to me in his natural form during the entire next week, nor do I try to summon him. But we see each other at the engagement feast, when Prince Brantley places his mother's ring on my finger and announces to a crowd of disappointed young women that he has chosen me as his bride.

My stepmother allows me to wear one of Amisa's dresses for the feast. She attends by special invitation, as the mother of the Crown Prince's fiancée, and during the following week, she takes on most of the duties of planning the wedding.

While I still care for the animals in the early morning, I'm excused from all my other duties at Eisling House. I am my stepmother's golden goose, and for once in my life she refrains from making me do heavy labor. Instead she uses her winnings from the ladies' dice games to hire a temporary housemaid.

Two days after the engagement feast, Gilda asks Brantley if my whole family can live at the palace, and he agrees. My stepsisters spend most of their time lounging in their luxurious palace suites, giggling in the hallways, flirting with the guards, and touching

priceless objects with a careless sort of curiosity, like children in a museum.

Meanwhile I submit to an endless rotation of dress fittings, elegant dinners, cake tastings, and consultations about the décor and music for the royal wedding. I'm not allowed to make any of the decisions. Gilda dictates all my choices, right down to the style of my wedding gown. I'm a docile puppet with an empty heart, manipulated by the strings of my stepmother's will.

Killian shows up now and then in the King's form, carrying on the ruse that His Majesty is still alive. When we're in the presence of others, I'm courteous to him, but whenever he tries to speak to me privately, I avoid him. Trying to reconcile his two faces is difficult enough, but it's harder when I think about how he rejected me when I begged for comfort. He was doing the noble thing, the right thing, but it still hurt when he left.

He swore he would save Brantley and me. Yet I don't see how he could possibly manage that, and I refuse to let myself have any hope. Once the wedding is over and Brantley has been enslaved, maybe Killian will try to rescue me before I'm murdered. If I'm locked in a dungeon, he might let me out and try to persuade me to run away. I'm not sure I would.

I once thought I could relinquish the Prince to his fate and leave the kingdom in my stepmother's hands, but now I don't think I can, even if staying here means losing my own life. I am the poison in the Prince's cup, though he doesn't know it. It's my fault he's vulnerable, and I can't simply abandon him just to save my own skin.

While Brantley readily gave my mother free reign with the wedding plans, he makes her operate under the watchful gaze of the Palace Steward, who has been tasked with keeping the wedding on budget. The Prince spends hours each day studying various thick tomes on whatever topic has most recently captured his attention. When he isn't studying, he's experimenting in his laboratory in the North Tower or sparring with one of his bodyguards, an attractive young man with dark skin and brown eyes named Winston, whom Brantley has referred to several times as his "best friend."

The bodyguard seems suspicious of me and my step-family, which makes me like him at once. But I'm fearful for him, too. I hate to think what will happen to Winston if he interferes with my stepmother's plans once she's in full control of Brantley. She could order the Prince to have his bodyguard executed, and though Brantley would agonize over it, he wouldn't be able to resist.

On the morning of the wedding, I'm heading from the baths to the dressing room where I'm to be clad in the puffy atrocity that Gilda calls my bridal gown. A handful of maids are escorting me, along with my stepmother. Perhaps I should be glad to have maids, but truthfully I prefer doing personal tasks on my own. Having servants feels intrusive, especially with Gilda's sharp eyes on me the whole time. She's been drinking less, perhaps because she realizes that a misstep this week could spoil her greatest triumph.

The maids and servants have been respectfully silent throughout most of the wedding preparations, but I know they've noticed how much my stepmother despises me. She fawns over me when the King and the Prince are around, but when it's only the servants, she allows some of her true nature to leak between the cracks of her smile.

As I follow the hallway with my entourage, the sound of voices catches my attention. Through a doorway I spot the King, Brantley, and Winston engaged in some kind of heated discussion.

The King glances up and catches my eye. He's dressed in black velvet today, looking like a dark wolf with a mane silvered by moonlight. I fucking hate how beautiful Killian is in this form, how powerful and regal he looks. I hate that when he gives me a dark, feral smile, I want to smile back.

We're almost past the doorway when I see the bodyguard lunge for Brantley and kiss him on the mouth.

Instantly I whip my head back around, facing forward. I don't gasp or give any outward sign of what I just saw. I think I'm the only one who noticed.

Best friend and bodyguard, indeed. And more than that, it seems. If Winston has been harboring a secret love for his Prince, no doubt he's in agony on Brantley's wedding day.

But there's nothing Winston or I can do to stop this marriage. And no matter what Killian is up to, I doubt he can stop it, either.

Two hours later, I've been bundled into a bulky concoction of ivory silk, which seems designed to be as unflattering to my body as possible. I have no doubt that's exactly what my stepmother intended. She also insisted I wear a towering curly wig, dusted with sparkly pink powder. My garish makeup is also courtesy of my stepmother and her girls, who kept giggling and insisting that the stylist add more.

I am a walking joke to my step-family. Even though this wedding is saving them from poverty and placing them at the top of the social ladder, they still hate me as much as they ever did.

Gilda, the girls, and I ride to the Cathedral of Fate in a royal carriage. They wave to the crowd, not allowing me space at the windows even though the people lining the streets call out my name, eager to see me.

When we arrive at the side entrance to the cathedral, I'm hustled along a dim hallway and into a room where I'm supposed to wait until it's time for the processional. My stepmother is called away to deal with some emergency related to the wedding bouquet, and I take the opportunity to send my maids out of the room so I can have a few quiet moments to myself.

Once the door is shut and I'm alone, I crumple to the floor, bowing over with my face in my hands. I would wipe off the garish makeup, but I've been ordered not to touch it. I've also been commanded not to cry, and not to show any signs of distress in public. But here, in the silence, I can be distressed all by myself, in my wig and my ugly dress.

For a moment I consider summoning Killian. This whole week, I've kept my pocket watch hidden in my corset, knowing my stepmother wouldn't allow me to wear it. When I was dressed like a servant, she didn't care, but now that I must wear finer clothing, the watch would seem too poor an ornament for a soon-to-be queen. It's tucked into my bodice now, near my heart. But my pride won't let me take it out… not after the way Killian and I ended things on the night of the last ball.

He's still around, despite the rift between us, and that is a comfort, an anchor in the storm of my distress. I think if I called him he would come. But what could he do? He can't spare me from this marriage. And I'm not ready to voice my worst fear aloud—the terror that this day will be my last.

Tonight, my stepmother will come to the room I share with Brantley. She'll remove the anklet from me and place it on the Prince. And then she will probably kill me.

I don't know how she'll do it. Maybe she'll have the Prince give the order. Maybe she has hired an assassin. Maybe she and her daughters will take turns stabbing me. Maybe it will be poison. Whatever happens, I know Killian will try to save me. But I can't be sure he'll succeed.

If I die, will he mourn me? Will it bother him to stand in the cathedral today, in the form of the King, and watch me marry someone else?

I wish I could cry. It would be some small measure of relief for the tempest inside me.

The door opens, and the King darts in, closing it swiftly behind him. He looks down at me, crouched there on the floor.

"What a ridiculous dress," he says. "By the god-stars, I've never seen such an ugly wedding gown, or such terrible makeup. And that wig—" He shudders. "My darling, you can't be seen like this."

If I could burst into tears, I would. His very presence breathes calm into my soul. It's a comfort I shouldn't feel around him, but I can't help it.

"I'm not allowed to take off the dress or change the makeup," I say quietly.

"But *I* can." He gives me the King's wolfish grin. "This wedding may be a farce, but you deserve to look as beautiful outside as you are inside."

"That's a compliment." I give him a trembling smile. "And I don't think I'm beautiful inside, at all."

He steps nearer and reaches down, gently lifting me to my feet. "Yes, you are. And they're all going to see it."

"You're not supposed to talk to me or touch me," I say, but there's no bite in the words, no force of will behind them.

"I gave you space," he whispers. "It's been fucking torture. But I had to come see you, before…" His words trail off.

Before I'm married. Before everything unfolds tonight, all the unknowns we can't plan for.

"You can't be caught in here," I tell him.

"I know. And though I've broken your trust, my darling Sin, I hope you know you can count on me tonight, whatever happens."

I nod, and the wig bobbles.

Killian chuckles in the deep voice of the King. "When the doors open and you begin your walk down the aisle, I'll send you my wedding gift."

He slips out, and not a moment too soon, because within a few minutes my maids return to escort me to the sanctuary. One of them hands me a bouquet of black-and-white skunk-flowers, wrinkling her nose apologetically as she says, "Your mother told me to give these to you."

The bouquet is a final slap in the face from my dear stepmother. No doubt someone objected to the use of skunk-flowers for the bridal bouquet of the queen-to-be, and that was the issue Gilda had to go and deal with. Apparently she triumphed over whoever was protesting.

The Cathedral of Fate is enormous, so the walk through its hallways takes a little time, during which the organ music grows louder and louder, like a grave summons from another realm.

At last I stand before the double doors, and when the organ music crests and switches into a new key, two ushers bow to me and pull the doors open.

As I take my first step into the sanctuary, the weight of the wig disappears from my head, and my hair tumbles free in shining golden ringlets. The heavy cosmetics dissipate from my skin, leaving it with a feeling of magical freshness.

At the same time, my gown transforms. Instead of the awkward bustle, the scratchy underskirts, and the giant rosettes across my chest, I'm now sheathed in a glimmering white gown that leaves my

shoulders bare and clings to my form like a kiss. Crystal slippers peek from beneath the hem as I walk down the aisle, and when I glance over my shoulder, I see a lacy train gliding behind me.

As a final touch, the bouquet I'm carrying turns into a cascade of blue flowers, blue as the gown I wore to the first ball.

It's magic, obvious and undeniable. Magic is rare in our kingdom, but not unheard of, and although the guests gasp at the sight, it's delight rather than fear. They probably assume that the palace invested in a bit of extra magic for the royal wedding, to make it special.

I can't imagine what my stepmother is thinking. As I pass her and my stepsisters, sitting in the front row, I can't resist glancing sideways at them. Gilda and Vashli are stricken with shock, but Amisa is smiling, her eyes bright with amusement. She isn't the kindest person, or the most intellectually gifted, but right now she is glorying in my triumph over her mother and sister, even if she has no idea how the feat was accomplished.

The Bishop of Fate stands on the platform at the head of the aisle, flanked by the King and the Crown Prince. I mount the steps slowly, careful not to trip, and then I pause, facing all three of them.

The Prince advances, his face white and his jaw set. I'm not sure whether he's stunned by the use of magic or still coping with the fact that his bodyguard is in love with him. Either way, the events we set in motion are carrying us along now, whether we like it or not.

Brantley bows, and I curtsy in return. When he offers his arm, I take it, and we face the crowd together.

The music softens to a whisper, then ceases, and the King steps forward.

"Welcome, my people, to the wedding of my only son, your Crown Prince! It is with great joy that I celebrate the Prince's discovery of his one true companion, his partner for life, the beautiful Celinda Laurier. And may I say, what an entrance! That magical surprise was brought to you by Lady Gilda Laurier, mother of the bride, the one who planned this wedding." He bows in my

stepmother's direction. "Thank you, milady, for making your daughter's special day so memorable."

My stepmother gives him a stiff nod and a tight smile.

Clever Killian. He made her seem like the one responsible for the magic, ensuring she can't question it openly. She'll have to wait until we're alone.

"It's customary for my part of the ceremony to end here," says the King. "But I want to use this moment to speak a few words to my son."

I frown slightly at Killian. What is he doing?

But he isn't looking at me. He's looking straight at the Prince, his eyes shining with sincere affection. "Brantley, you have been a true joy to me. I could not have asked for a better son or a more capable successor. You think differently than most people, but that isn't a weakness, that is *strength.* That is *magic*. I'm so proud of you, and I'm confident that when I leave, the kingdom will be in good hands."

Brantley clears his throat and nods. His eyes are wet.

"And as for your bride, the fair Celinda," says the King, turning to me. "She is devoted to you beyond her own well-being. And that is the truest kind of love."

I hold my breath and his gaze—only for a moment, because any longer would seem odd to those around us. But from Killian's look of fierce fondness and approval, I draw the courage to get through the ceremony that follows.

During the vows I respond as I'm supposed to, and when the Prince and I are declared husband and wife, I kiss him before them all. It's a chaste, sweet kiss, and afterward we walk down the aisle together, out the cathedral doors into the cold, bright air, where the gathered citizens greet us with a roar of joy and shower our path with the petals of white winter roses.

I'm spared from my stepmother's presence during the rest of the day. Brantley and I embark on an open-carriage tour of the city, then make an appearance on the balcony of the courthouse building, where Brantley speaks to the crowd. After that, we return to the

palace for a great and glorious reception, during which the Prince and I greet countless well-wishers.

Through it all, I find myself looking for the King every few minutes, every time my gut begins to twist into nauseated anxiety. Whenever I spot him, my muscles relax a bit, and I find the strength to keep going.

After standing for hours to receive guests, we are finally able to sit at the royal table and preside over the feast, which I can barely taste because I know what comes after the dining and the dancing. Within an hour or two, Brantley and I will retire to his suite. I'm not sure if he will want to consummate the marriage or not, but at some point our privacy will be interrupted by my stepmother. And what unfolds after that is in Fate's hands.

The King—Killian—was present at the start of the feast; when I look for him again, he has disappeared. I keep searching the crowd for those broad shoulders, that silver hair, but I don't see him. His absence leaves me unsettled, tossed in the sea of my emotions with no anchor to hold me steady.

Where did he go?

Brantley leans over to me and says in an undertone, "One dance, and then I think we can escape and get some rest. I shall need months to recover from the past two weeks."

"I feel the same way," I tell him. "I'm not used to being around so many people all the time."

"The demands of royal life can be difficult," he replies. "But you can still carve out time for yourself and your interests. I will be here to help you adjust in any way I can."

I smile at him and cover his hand with mine. "And I will help *you* in any way I can, as well."

When he smiles at me, I come to a decision, one I've been toying with for days.

The moment the anklet comes off, I must try to kill my stepmother. As much as I believe Killian will try to save me, I can't count on him. I must be prepared to save myself.

Of course, since I'm forbidden to touch actual weapons, I can't hide a dagger beneath the pillows of the royal bed, in preparation

for my own defense. I'll need to find a less traditional weapon, or perhaps use my bare hands. I'm strong from hard work. Maybe I can overcome Gilda and strangle her.

My smile conceals the murderous thoughts in my head as Brantley and I descend from the royal table, accompanied by the cheers of the guests who are all eager to witness our first dance as a married couple. There's a beaded loop on my train, and I slip my wrist through it, so I can hold the extra material out of the way while dancing. A tiny, thoughtful touch from my Faerie godfather.

*Where is he?*

I've been in a daze since the wedding, but as Brantley and I begin the waltz, my senses begin to reawaken. The scent of roast pork, spiced apples, and hot buttered bread fills the air, mingling with the varied fragrances of the guests' perfumes. The cake my stepmother chose—carrot and ginger with coconut frosting—has barely been touched, and it towers in the corner like a pale gravestone, a counterpoint to the romantic dance tune played by the royal musicians.

I'm painfully conscious of every click of my crystal shoes on the polished floor, conscious of my stepmother's eyes fixed on me, conscious of the gown clinging to my body. This dress has lasted longer than anything else Killian has made for me, probably because he transformed the material of the original dress rather than creating something out of nothing. Still, it must have cost him a lot of energy, especially since he has had to hold his own glamour for many hours.

Maybe that's why he had to leave the reception—he needed to rest and regain his energy. I hope he recovers in time, although I have no idea how he plans to stop Gilda. I suppose he could have told someone about my stepmother's wicked scheme, but if he'd mentioned it to anyone, it might have interfered with the wedding, which in turn could have ruined my one chance to be free.

Killian has vowed never to kill a human, and that vow is binding. That's not to say he couldn't injure one, but I've never seen him fight, or use any sort of combative magic. He's simply not the warrior type. He's an artist with clothing, a granter of wishes, a

generous soul whose two weak points are his lustful nature and his willingness to deceive others.

I never thought I would know a Faerie so well.

Despite the thoughts circling through my head, I've kept dancing while the music played. But the song is ending, and Brantley pulls me in for a light kiss that makes the guests cheer madly. He waves to them, and so do I.

"Eat, drink, and dance!" he calls. "My bride and I are exhausted, so if you will kindly excuse us, we will retire."

Judging by the surprise on the guests' faces, it's a little early for a couple to leave their own party—but Brantley, true to form, doesn't seem to notice. He is done with crowds, and he is putting his own needs first in this instance, which I respect. By going ahead with this marriage, he has sacrificed more than his people will ever know, to uphold what he believes to be his duty.

A handful of guards escort us upstairs, and a few servants help us each prepare for bed. Only when Brantley and I are both dressed in fine nightclothes do they bow respectfully and leave us alone.

I smooth the front of the silky ivory nightgown. It's designed to hug my breasts, and the lace along the neckline practically demands male attention, yet Brantley doesn't give it a second look.

"I think I'll fetch a book from the study," he says. "I like to read before I sleep."

"Of course."

He disappears into an adjoining room. In his absence, I hurry out of the bedroom, through the sitting room to the door of the royal suite. I lean out into the hallway, speaking to the guards in an undertone. "If my mother comes looking for me, you may let her in. She has a wedding night gift to deliver. And do not enter the chamber, no matter what you may hear. The Prince has certain needs, and certain things he has asked me to do for him tonight."

It's something Gilda ordered me to say, word for word, to ease her path into the wedding chamber. I hope it's the last command of hers I ever have to carry out.

The guards reply, "Yes, Princess," and I try to conceal the jolt of surprise that passes through me when I hear my new title. I heard it

shouted by our subjects this afternoon, but hearing it spoken respectfully in a more intimate setting feels different, and frighteningly real.

I return to the bed, propping myself awkwardly against the pillows. I'm so nervous it feels as if my insides have bunched themselves into knots and are trying to squeeze up my throat. A panicked sweat films my forehead and the back of my neck.

Brantley emerges from the study with a thick book in his hand. He's wearing loose lounge pants and a matching nightshirt. His brown hair, usually so neatly combed, is ruffled.

This time, when he looks at me, his gaze lingers on my chest, and his cheeks flush slightly.

"Do you, um…" I clear my throat. "Did you want to have sex?"

"We are supposed to consummate the marriage," he says. "It is my duty as the Crown Prince."

"Yes, but if you are not so inclined, we don't have to fulfill that duty tonight. And I want you to know that if there is someone else you want, I understand, and I won't object to you fulfilling those desires."

He raises an eyebrow. "Barely married, and you're already making allowances for infidelity?"

"I want you to be happy," I reply.

He opens his mouth to respond, but at that moment, someone raps lightly on the bedroom door, then enters without waiting for an invitation.

Gilda steps into the room, her lips compressed and her eyes feverishly bright with anticipation.

This is her moment of triumph.

"My lady!" Brantley exclaims. "May I ask what you're doing in here?"

"I've come to fulfill a family tradition," says Gilda. "Tell him, Cind—I mean, Celinda."

One more command to fulfill.

"In our family, it is tradition for the bride to wear a special heirloom on her wedding day," I tell the Prince. "On the wedding night, the bride's father or mother transfers the heirloom to her

husband, to symbolize a new connection in the family tree, a bond stronger than blood. It will only take a moment. Please, Brantley… for me."

I hate every word I just spoke, and I hate how readily he accepts the lie. How am I any better than Killian in this moment? I'm bound by the anklet, but if I had really tried, could I have found some way to warn the Prince? Some way to avoid this?

It's too late now.

"Sit side by side on the bed, against the pillows," says my stepmother. "Feet outstretched."

Brantley and I obey. The anklet glows golden against the pale skin of my ankle.

My body tightens, my eyes scanning the room for weapons that are not weapons. I could smash the lamp on the table against Gilda's skull, then choke her. But I will have to be quick, before she snaps the anklet around Brantley's leg, or killing her might end his life as well.

"First we anoint the bride," says my stepmother. She takes out a flask and sprinkles its contents over the anklet and my leg. She never mentioned that step in the removal process, but it occupies her for a moment, so I let my hand creep nearer to the base of the lamp.

"And now, the removal of the heirloom, and its transfer to the groom." My stepmother takes out a pair of thin black gloves and pulls them on. When she touches the anklet, it unclasps immediately.

She pulls it off me.

My fingers close around the base of the lamp. But when I try to lift it, there's no strength in my arm. I can't lift the lamp at all.

I try to grip it in both hands, but the same weakness pervades my other arm, too. I can move, clumsily, but my muscles feel like gelatin. My entire body is helpless, my strength gone.

"What's happening?" Even my voice is weak, and my protest is barely a whisper. "What did you do?"

But even as I ask the question, I know the answer. The "anointing" was a trick, a ruse so Gilda could sprinkle some kind of

toxin on my skin. She used the gloves to protect herself from the liquid. I don't know if it's fatal or temporary—all I know is that I'm useless, and that Killian hasn't come. He's not here to save us. And I can't stop Gilda from closing the metal band around Brantley's ankle with a decisive *click*.

The moment it touches his skin, he cries out in pain.

Gilda draws back, startled, her mouth agape as Brantley's body shimmers and transforms into a slim, tall figure with purple hair.

Killian.

He's writhing, his face contorted with agony as the anklet sears his skin. Smoke hisses from the blackening wound—a wound that's expanding with every second he wears the anklet.

"Take it off him!" I try to shout, but I can barely speak. "Take it off, please take it off!"

"What is the meaning of this?" gasps my stepmother. "Tell me, now!"

Killian is white with pain, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. "It means your reign of terror is over before it began, bitch."

"Whoever you are, you will obey me," she says. "Tell me your name."

He lets out a groan of anguish, but he manages to say, "No."

A single word of defiance. The anklet was never meant for a Faerie, and though it burns him, it cannot control him.

He did this for Brantley. For me.

"Take it off him," I whisper. "Take it off."

"I can't take it off now," hisses my stepmother. "You fucking fool. I knew you were keeping secrets, but *this*? Consorting with a Faerie? You little whore, you've ruined everything!"

She pounces, climbing on top of me and gripping my throat. My limp fingers fumble over her straining hands as she brutally cuts off my breath.

Killian bellows with pain as he lunges forward. He grips my ankle where the band once was, and I feel a sensation of freshness surging over my skin as he cleanses the toxin.

The efforts costs him dearly, and he screams—a scream of pure agony, from a mind riven by the madness of pain.

Whatever it cost him, his magic works. With the toxin gone, my control over my body returns almost instantly, and as my lungs tighten to the brink of explosion, I reach for the lamp. With all the strength of the arm that has scrubbed her floors, ironed her clothes, and carried her laundry, I smash the lamp into the side of my stepmother's head.

She topples aside, dazed. I throw her off me, off the bed. Tumbling after her, I strike her skull again with the lamp. I don't want her dead, yet—I won't put Killian at further risk. But I want her unconscious, unable to interfere while I try to save him.

He's lying on the bed, his face a rictus of pain. More of his leg is burning now, the charred blackness spreading up toward his knee with frightening speed. The heat of the magical reaction is burning away his clothes, scorching the sheets.

"Killian." I hold his face between my hands, choking on the sobs that stick in my bruised throat. "Killian, tell me what to do. Tell me how to help you. Can you do any magic?"

"No," he gasps out. "It's gone too far now."

"But your gift of walking between realms—that's different, right? It's not Faerie magic, it's something else. A god-touched gift. Can you portal, Killian?"

His only answer is a broken groan, rattling from the depths of his lungs.

Seizing his body, I drag him upright. He's lighter than a human male of his size would be, thank Fate, or I wouldn't be able to manage it.

"Make a portal, Killian," I urge him through my tears. "Make a portal to Faerie, right now. We have to get help from your parents. Please. Now. You can do this, you *have* to do this, because if you die, *fuck you*. I can't exist without you, you stupid fucking bastard, you idiot, you asshole—"

I barely know what I'm saying, but it works, because the air in front of us shimmers in a way I recognize. I don't think twice—I drag him forward, and we fall through the portal into Faerie.

# 17

Killian and I tumble onto the smooth hardwood floor of a shop outfitted with shelves, barrels, and bins, all of them brimming with candies of every imaginable shape, size, and color. I barely notice our surroundings, though—my gaze fixes on a tall Fae male with pink hair and blue dragonfly wings. He's standing beside a counter, sorting wrapped candies into different bowls.

As we crash to the floor he spins around, alarm in his golden eyes. The alarm turns to stricken terror when he sees Killian writhing and groaning in my arms.

I know that terror. It's the same fear I felt when I discovered my father, dead and bloodless in the garden.

"Clara!" yells the golden-eyed Faerie, but he doesn't wait for whoever he called to arrive. He drops to his knees beside Killian, pinpointing the cause of the pain in an instant. He grips the anklet, hissing with pain as it scorches his own hands.

This must be Killian's father, though they look the same age. There's an undeniable resemblance between them.

"You can't take the anklet off," I explain tearfully. "I wore it for years. He tried everything to get it off me, and now…"

"We have to counteract the effects." The winged Faerie leaps up and darts around the shop, snatching sweets from various drawers before returning to Killian. "Open your mouth, son. Eat this."

Killian shakes his head and gasps, "Won't help."

"Try it," insists his father.

Killian tries, but he's choking on his own screams. I hold his head, sobbing, my tears falling on his beautiful tortured face.

A pretty, slender woman with long brown hair rushes into the room. There's paint on her fingers and a few smudges on her face—green, blue, and purple. "Finias, when you use my name like that it makes me fear the worst—" She stops, her face blanching. "What happened?"

"The anklet," I sob out. "She took it off me and put it on him. It's hurting him, please, please…"

"Finias, get that amulet Krael lent you," says Clara sharply. "The one that allows Fae to bear the touch of iron for a while."

He bolts out of the room while Clara takes his place beside Killian and assesses the situation. "There's more than iron at work here," she mutters. "Much more. Is this why you've been asking so many questions about coercion objects?"

Killian nods, then lets out another scream as more of his flesh blackens under the influence of the anklet. His whole leg is charred black now, nearly to the hip.

"This object is poisonous to anyone with god-touched blood," Clara says. "We can't wait." Rising, she reaches into a leather pouch at her waist and withdraws a coiled whip. As she shakes it out, it begins to glow. "I'm sorry to cause you more pain, but we can't let this spread any further."

White-faced, she flicks the glowing whip with a practiced hand.

It slices neatly through Killian's leg just below the hip, severing the entire limb from his body.

He shrieks, clinging to me so tightly that his nails draw blood. I don't care. I hold him as I watch his severed leg crumble into chunks of ash.

The whip cauterized the wound, so he isn't bleeding. Clara pulls back her weapon, and when the glow along its length fades, she

coils it up and tucks it away. Kneeling again, she presses a palm to Killian's forehead.

He's already breathing easier, now that he's separated from the source of the agony. His eyes close, but he still clutches me as if I'm his link to life.

Finias darts back in, carrying some sort of amulet. When he notices his son's missing limb, he snarls several words in a language I don't know before switching back to the common tongue. "God-stars, sugar, did you *have* to do that?"

"It was spreading," Clara replies. She's trembling, her eyes shining with tears. "I had no choice. Heal him, Finias. You can heal him, can't you?"

"Of course, dearest. Of course," he answers in a softer tone. He squeezes her hand briefly, then moves in beside Killian and offers him a bright red candy. "Chew this carefully before you swallow."

Anxiously I watch Killian chew the sweet. "Will that heal his leg?" I ask. "Can the Fae regrow their limbs?"

"Some of us can," replies Finias. "Killian is a special case in many ways, because of his parentage and how he was born—"

"Son of a Faerie and a god-touched human, born at the change of seasons under a mirrored moon," I say.

Finias looks at me more intently, his golden eyes warm with interest. "He told you."

"Yes."

"And this—" he points to the anklet, lying in a pile of black ash. "You said you wore it for a long time?"

"Yes."

Finias glances at Clara, who nods and says, "That explains all the questions from him lately." She turns her attention to her son. His eyes are open now, and he holds her gaze briefly before glancing away with a regretful grimace.

"I think it's time for an explanation," Clara says, in a tone of quiet authority. "I don't understand why you didn't tell us about this anklet before now."

"I asked around about it," says Killian. "But I generally prefer to resolve my own problems rather than running to my parents. That's

how you raised us, after all. To be self-sufficient."

"Self-sufficiency doesn't mean you don't ask for help!" Clara exclaims.

"I did ask for help!"

"Now then, you two," interjects Finias. "The crisis is past, and while he heals, there is time for explanations. But first—a snack." He leaps up, bounds over to the counter, and lifts the glass cover over a plate of frosted cookies. Taking three of them, he hands one to Clara and one to me, keeping the third for himself.

"I don't get a cookie?" Killian raises an eyebrow.

"You'll be eating more of the healing sweets in a moment. That's quite enough for your system to handle." Finias perches on a stool and crosses one long leg over the other. "And now, I think it's time for our son's companion to introduce herself. In fact, I would like to hear the whole story from her."

His yellow eyes lock with mine. There's an ageless depth in those eyes, and a keen intelligence underneath the playful sparkle of mischief. I get the impression that Killian's father is both very kind and very, very dangerous. Rather like his mother.

"I'll tell you everything," I say. "But please don't be angry with him. Whatever mistakes he made, he paid for them today."

Clara and Finias are silent while I unfold the events of the past weeks, starting with the day my family received the Prince's invitation. I speak quickly, summarizing large parts of the tale.

When I reach this evening's events, Killian explains how he left the bridal reception early and hid in the Prince's suite, in the study. He knew Brantley would go in there to fetch a book to read before bed, as was his habit. The moment Brantley walked into the study, Killian blew enchanted dust in his face to put him to sleep for a while, then returned to the bedroom glamoured as my new husband.

Throughout the tale, Clara has been sitting on the floor, holding her son's hand. But when I finish describing the confrontation with my stepmother, she lays Killian's hand down and rises. "This woman, this stepmother—she's in the palace right now?"

"Yes," I reply. "She should still be in the Prince's bedroom. I knocked her out cold."

"Killian," says Clara calmly. "Do you think you could make a portal for me?"

"Clara, you shouldn't," Finias objects.

"I'll only be a minute," she replies. "I have something to do."

I suspect I know what that something is, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to witness it.

"I'll go with you," I offer, shifting Killian's head off my lap. "Two can pass through at once, right?"

"That's right." Clara surveys me for a moment, then nods. "Very well, come along."

With a sigh, Killian forms a portal in the air. "It won't stay open for more than a few minutes. You'll have to be quick."

Clara steps through without hesitation, and I follow her.

We step into the Prince's bedroom and stand beside the gigantic bed, in the dim glow of the lamps. The lamp I used to strike Gilda lies on the floor beside her. My stepmother is conscious, but she seems dizzy—she has propped her back against the nightstand and she's gingerly touching a bloody cut on her temple.

When she sees me, her face changes. The hatred she has always felt for me is still there, but I spot a new emotion in her eyes, one that she has never shown toward me before.

Fear.

Without the anklet—without complete control over me—she is afraid.

"You came out of thin air," she gasps. "Witch. Where is the other one, the face-changer?"

"That was my son, bitch," says Clara pleasantly. "You nearly killed him. And from what Celinda has told us, you're responsible for at least one other death and years of mental, physical, and emotional torture."

She steps forward, extracting her whip from its pouch. "I'm not usually the vengeful sort. I prefer defense, not offense. And yet, for you, I'll make an exception. Let's think of it as me defending your potential future victims, with a side of punishment because you hurt my son."

Gilda cringes back. "Please… I didn't know who he was."

"Exactly. You thought he was helpless to your dark magic. That he would be your slave. That you would rule a kingdom with the same wicked cruelty you showed to this brave girl." Clara jerks her head toward me. "I may not be a resident of the mortal realm anymore, but I can still do my part to protect its citizens from you."

My stepmother's face fractures with realization and fear. She looks older, more worn, and more fragile than ever, and perhaps I should pity her… but I begged her for mercy a thousand times. She could have ordered me not to, but she allowed it, because she *enjoyed* hearing my suffering. She liked listening to me sob and plead for some shred of compassion.

Clara glances at me. "Is there anything you would like to say to her?"

The question confirms my suspicion that Killian's mother is going to end the life of the woman I've hated since childhood. The thing I've fantasized about for years is finally coming to pass. I thought I wanted to be the one to do it, but now that the moment has come, I'm relieved I don't have to.

"Just this." I approach Gilda and sink to one knee beside her. "I want you to look at me and say, 'Please, Your Highness, have mercy.'"

Gilda stares at me, abject terror warring with hatred. She grits out the words. "Please, Your Highness… have mercy."

I smile. "No."

"Think of the girls," she protests shrilly as I step back and let Clara take my place. "Think of your sisters! You're stealing their mother from them."

"You stole my father from me," I retort. "And they're adults. Independence will be good for them."

"You hideous changeling!" she squawks. "You idiotic—"

But her tirade cuts off as the tip of Clara's whip snakes out and slices neatly across her throat.

The cut is deep but bloodless, and for a moment Gilda blinks as if she isn't sure what's happening, Then, slowly, her eyes go blank, and she slumps over, her head hanging crookedly on her damaged neck.

"She deserved a more agonizing death," says Clara. "But I'm not one to take pleasure in torture. Unless it's the sensual kind of torture."

I raise my eyebrows, a little startled at her openness. She looks back at me and smiles slightly. "Welcome to the family. Help me drag your stepmother's body through the portal back into Faerie. If we leave it here, there will be too many questions."

We take hold of Gilda's body together. The limp heaviness of it sickens me, and when her head flops to the side on her partly severed neck, I nearly vomit.

"You get used to it," says Clara.

"Do I want to get used to it?"

She chuckles ruefully. "That's up to you. Are you planning to live in the mortal realm, or in Faerie? Because Faerie can be as brutal as it is beautiful."

"Me, live in Faerie?" I almost choke on the words.

She gives me a quizzical look. "I thought you and Killian…"

"I… well… he… that is… I haven't…" Fuck, what is wrong with me? Heat floods my face, intensifying as Clara smiles.

"I see. You're still in *that* part of things. Trust me, I know how loving a Faerie can feel at first—perilous and painful. But from one human to another—they're worth it."

We both fall silent as we drag Gilda closer to the portal.

"Will it accept all of us?" I ask.

"Yes," Clara assures me. "It accepts two living beings and whatever they're carrying."

We step through, bringing the body with us, and we drop her on the floor of Finias's candy shop. He's sitting on the counter now, with the heels of his boots propped on a stool, and he's licking a peppermint stick.

"Look at you two," he croons. "Bonding already, hauling corpses around together. Adorable."

Killian rolls his eyes. "My father is dreadfully casual about murder, especially when Clara is the one killing people."

Clara sighs, exasperated. "You make it sound like I kill people often. I only do it with very good reason. In this case, the bitch had

it coming."

"I'll dispose of her, dearest," Finias offers, hopping off the counter and vanishing his peppermint stick into midair. "Feed the boy another sweet, would you? The rare ones, the red glossy kind. They're most effective with this sort of thing, regenerating limbs and such."

"Maybe Celinda would like to feed him the sweets?" Clara suggests. "I'll run over to the palace and ask the Keeper of Artifacts to come down and fetch this anklet. It belongs in a vault, not lying around where anyone could touch it. Before you deal with the body, help Killian to a bedroom, would you? And clean up those ashes as well. What if a customer came into the shop and saw the mess?"

"Of course, sugar," responds Finias.

Clara gives her son a kiss on the forehead and kisses Finias on the mouth, then smiles at me before leaving the shop.

"She likes you," says Killian with a weary grin. He winces as his father helps him up.

"Bring those red sweets, will you, Celinda?" asks Finias.

I collect the candies he indicated and follow the two of them. Is it my imagination, or is Killian's residual limb already longer? Can his leg already be growing back, just minutes after it was severed? I already know how Faeries help mortals heal—but what kind of substance could regrow a Faerie's limb so fast? I'm not sure I want to know, so I distract myself by admiring my colorful surroundings.

The house is a cozy, rambling structure with beautiful paintings covering most of its walls. Some of the artwork nearest the floor is messy and faded, as if it was painted by children and has been there for years. The rooms are slightly untidy, filled with cushions and comforts, and there's a pervasive air of warmth, joy, and creativity. It's a *home*, in every sense of the word.

Finias takes Killian and me into a first floor bedroom and settles his son on the bed.

"If you'll step into the hallway with me a moment, Celinda," he says coolly.

"What are you going to say to her?" asks Killian, frowning.

"She can share it with you later, if she would like to," Finias responds, taking my elbow gently and guiding me out. He closes the door, and we walk several paces away from the bedroom before he turns to face me. His eyes have lost their sparkle, and only earnest regret remains.

"Killian did not treat you well," he says in a low tone. "Did he apologize for his deception?"

"He did," I reply.

"The Fae have a different code of morality than humans do. That doesn't excuse what he did, but perhaps it can help you understand. I myself have done countless terrible things, especially in my youth."

I stare at him. "You look about twenty-five. How old are you?"

He smiles, and I notice with shock that every one of his teeth are sharply pointed. "Never mind my age. I want you to know that despite his mistakes, Killian is the kindest soul I've ever known—even gentler than his mother. His compassion drives him to serve humans in need, and it prompted him to take a vow, decades ago, that he would never kill a human being."

"He told me about that, too," I say.

"I'm not asking you to forgive him or excuse what he did," Finias continues. "I simply want you to understand the better part of his character. And I apologize, as his father, for the pain he caused you."

"Your apology is appreciated, but unnecessary," I assure him. "As for Killian—I think I forgave him that very same night, to be honest. Whatever wrong he did me, he has more than paid for it by risking his own life to set me free and to spare the Prince."

"Ah yes, the Prince. Your husband." Finias raises an eyebrow significantly.

"Perhaps not for long. There is a practice called annulment in my kingdom." I bite my lip, afraid I've gone too far and revealed too much of what I really want. The things I love have always been taken away from me. But Gilda isn't here to destroy them anymore. Perhaps I'm allowed to have hope, to experience love. To plan for a future.

"I should go to him," I say.

"By all means." But as I turn to leave, Finias says, "He's right, you know. Clara likes you. And so do I. Perhaps we are drawn to other wounded souls who have endured great torment and emerged stronger for it."

He saves me from having to reply by sauntering off down the hall. I watch him go, wondering what torment a Faerie like him might have suffered. I suppose I always thought of Faeries as powerful beings who didn't have to fear harm because they had magic. But that assumption has been proved wrong more than once lately.

I return to the room where Killian lies on the bed, watching half a dozen floating orbs of light drifting in slow circles against the ceiling. His purple hair is still damp from the sweat of his agony, and his skin is far whiter than usual.

I hold one of the red candies near his lips. "Open."

He lifts his head, takes the candy in his teeth, and chews it slowly.

"Hell of an introduction to my parents," he mutters. "At least my sister wasn't here. Things would have been much louder and more frantic."

He's talking so casually about the situation, and yet his leg is fucking *gone*. I take his face in my hands, overwhelmed by a sudden, panicked anger. "Do you realize you almost *died*?"

"I'm quite aware of the fact. I figured it was likely, and I was prepared for it."

"But *I* wasn't!" I exclaim. "Killian, how would your parents have felt about that? About you dying for some human girl you barely know?"

"Some human girl?" His gaze turns fiery. "You think that's all you are to me?" He drags himself up to a sitting position against the headboard. "Fuck that, Celinda. You know better."

"What exactly do you think I know?" My stomach is shivery with anticipation, my heart rate higher than ever. I feel as if I'm standing on the edge of a cliff with the wind blowing wildly, threatening to knock me off the brink into freefall. And I *want* the dizzying drop, the terrifying thrill of the descent.

Killian reaches for my hand and curls his long fingers around mine. "You are my madness," he says quietly. "I fucking lost my mind over you. That's not your fault, I know. But when I lost my mind, I lost my heart, too. I would die for you, Sin—I would *kill* for you if I had to. I understand that you hate me for lying to you, and I can live with that, as long as I know that you're free."

"But I'm not free," I whisper. "I'm married to the Prince, and the King is dead. When I go back, I will have to wake Brantley and tell him his father is gone. I don't know how to do that, Killian. He'll be heartbroken. And then… I want the marriage annulled, but I can't do that to him. I'll have to stay with him, to comfort him…"

"I think he might seek comfort from someone else," says Killian with a wry smile. "The Prince has recently realized a few things about himself. He will grieve for his father, yes, but I don't think he will grieve the marriage."

"His bodyguard," I say. "He's in love with his best friend, isn't he? And despite being so brilliant, he never saw the signs until now."

"Precisely." A faint smile crosses Killian's lips before he frowns again. "And don't talk as if you're going back alone. I'm returning with you, though I won't be able to glamour myself as the King again. I've already placed his body in his bed, and the servants will find him there in the morning. He's been preserved by magic, so the death will seem recent. They'll think his heart failed while he slept. But I can take on an alternate glamour and remain nearby. I'll stay as long as you need me."

I swallow hard, rubbing my fingers over his. "Then you might be staying a long time."

He goes very still. "How long?"

"Only until I die."

"Is that so?"

"I have conditions, of course."

"Obviously."

"One—you will help me settle things at the palace. Two—once my annulment goes through, you'll bring me back to Faerie with you. I haven't seen much of it yet, but I'd like to. And three—I will forgive

your great deception, if you will agree to take on the form of the King whenever I ask you to. For fun."

"What sort of fun?" He blinks at me with feigned innocence.

"Don't look at me like that," I say, shoving him. "Not after you asked me to *step* on you. Your father thinks you're this gentle, sweet soul, and you are, but you're also a degenerate scoundrel. A depraved, lecherous fiend."

"I like it when you call me names."

We're face to face, a sensuous heat quivering between us. I lean in by instinct, drawn by the shape of his lips. It's not the King's beautiful mouth, but Killian's natural form is even more precious to me.

"To be clear," he whispers, "I love you."

"I know." I kiss him softly. "And I—gods, I want to say it back, but I'm afraid if I do, something will happen and you'll be taken away from me. Or I'll wake up and realize that this was all a dream—that I'm still on my cot in the cellar of Eisling House, with a day of labor and abuse ahead of me."

"This is no dream, darling. I'll pinch you, if you like. Isn't that how humans prove to themselves that something is reality, and not just a wish breathed by a sleeping mind?"

He catches my lower lip between his teeth and bites down a little, just enough to cause a little flare of pain. Then his hand slides up to my breast and tweaks my nipple through the fabric of my nightdress.

My *nightdress*.

"Killian," I say, aghast. "I just realized—I met your parents while in my nightclothes!"

He shrugs. "They don't care. Faeries are far less concerned with such things. Well… I should say *most* Faeries are less concerned with such things. The Seelie Fae of the royal court tend to be a bit more rigid with rules of behavior and appearance."

He stops talking and closes his eyes for a moment, his face falling into a weary expression.

Last time he was wounded, I helped him heal with sex. This time he has Finias's spells to assist in his recovery, and despite the

teasing pinch to my nipple, he doesn't seem to be in the mood for a quick fuck. He needs sleep.

I start to move off the bed, to leave him in peace, but he grabs my arm. "Please stay with me."

A sweet warmth spreads through my heart. It's a wonderful feeling to be needed in this way—not being commanded or used, but simply wanted. I lie down beside him, my head on his shoulder and my hand on his chest.

Somehow, in the course of a fortnight, he became not only my dearest friend, but my gateway into a world of pleasure that I never imagined I'd be allowed to enjoy. He tricked me, yes, but he also sacrificed himself, his artistry, and his magic for me, generously and enthusiastically, over and over. He braved dangers I will never know to obtain the Wraith's Scythe on the off chance it could destroy my anklet. He would have died for me tonight, with perfect willingness.

If he can be so courageous, surely I can, too. I can be brave enough to say the three most dangerous words I've ever spoken.

I speak them softly in the quiet of the bedroom. "I love you."

His chest rises with a quick intake of breath. "After everything I did?"

"Yes."

When he speaks again, his voice is thick with emotion. "For the rest of my life, I will strive to be worthy of your love."

Smiling, I snuggle a little closer to his body. "You already are."

# 18

I'm not sure how long we sleep cuddled together on the bed, but when I finally wake and look down at Killian's lower half, he has an entire new leg, bare and whole and perfect. He's still dressed in the Prince's nightclothes, with one leg of the pants burned away. I wonder if he can mend them when he wakes up.

Someone taps at the door, then enters. It's Clara, carrying a tray with two steaming mugs.

Embarrassed, I start to move away from her son, but she shakes her head. "Stay where you are. Don't mind me."

As I settle back in beside Killian, she sets the tray down and takes a piece of paper from her pocket. She hands it to me without comment.

It's a sketch of me and Killian, right after I hauled him through the portal, when she entered the shop and saw us. His face is agonized, and mine is a mirror of the same agony, stricken with love and fear. It's strange seeing my own anguish from Clara's perspective, and tears well up in my eyes at the raw emotion she managed to capture, the poignant beauty of sacrifice and despair.

"It's exquisite," I whisper.

"Keep it."

"Thank you." I examine the picture again, marveling at how she conveyed so much with a simple black-and-white sketch. "You're so talented."

She lets the compliment pass with the quiet confidence of someone who knows her own skill. "I suspected Killian had met someone special. He wouldn't say much about you, even when I asked, but I could tell something was different. He's been hurt before, you know. He wants a love for a lifetime, and many Faeries don't like that sort of commitment. So I was cautious about the idea of him giving his heart again. But when I saw you there on the floor with him, I knew you loved him back."

I whisper the words, still half-afraid to confess it. "I do."

"He has his faults, like his father. I won't make excuses for his mistakes. That's between the two of you. But I want to thank you for bringing him here before it was too late. Losing him would break Finias, and as for me…" She draws a long breath. "I couldn't bear it."

I'm about to answer when the door bursts open and a slim female Faerie with bright green hair and pink dragonfly wings bursts into the room. Her eyes are bright green to match her hair, and her cheeks are dotted with pink freckles.

"Finias said you cut off Killian's *leg*!" she says to Clara. "I told him he's insane, which we all knew, of course, but even more so than usual—it's not true, is it? Killian looks fine to me—and who is *that*? Look at you, you're rather pretty, aren't you? All cozied up to my brother—why am I always the last to know the important news, like Killian finding a partner? I'm his sister, for the god-stars' sake. He should tell me *first.* Fates have mercy, what the fuck is he wearing? Burnt pajamas?"

I exchange glances with Clara, who merely leans back in her chair, humor dancing in her eyes.

Killian's lashes blink open, but when he sees his sister, he groans and shuts them again, pulling me tighter against him.

His sister grabs a small pillow from a nearby armchair and smacks his face with it. "Explain what's going on, right now, or I swear—"

"Fuck, Úna," he grumbles, sitting up. "I almost died, this is Celinda, and we have to go."

"That's not *nearly* enough information," Úna says.

"It will have to do for now, or you can pester our parents until they fill in the details." He moves to the edge of the bed, inspecting his new leg. He rises, testing it, and then, seeming satisfied, he tilts back his head and lets magic flow over his body, transforming the royal nightwear into a sleek purple suit. "Much better. I would change your clothing as well, darling, but I have a scheme in mind and it requires you remaining just as you are."

I glance down at my nightdress ruefully. There's nowhere for me to safely stow Clara's sketch, so I place it next to the tray she brought. "Keep this safe for me?"

She nods, picking up one of the steaming mugs and taking a sip.

Killian forms a shimmering portal in the air and grabs my hand. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

"Killian," says Úna warningly. "If you almost die again, I will murder you myself."

Her tone is sharp yet brittle, and I spot tears in her bright green eyes.

"Never fear, sister mine," says Killian. "We're going to wake a sleeping prince, annul my darling's marriage, announce the death of a King, and spread rumors about a certain wicked stepmother. Nothing remotely dangerous."

"Come and have some hot chocolate, Úna," Clara suggests.

"Fine." Úna stalks over to the tray and grabs a mug. "But when you come back, we're having a long talk about the unnecessary risks you take in the mortal realm."

"Can't wait," Killian says dryly, and walks through the portal with me.

After the colorful bedroom and Úna's tempestuous presence, the royal bedchamber seems pale, somber, and eerily quiet. According to the clock on a nearby shelf, we're still in the pre-dawn hours.

Killian goes into the study, then returns to say, "Your husband is still on the sofa, sleeping comfortably. He won't wake for a few hours."

I don't answer him. I'm gazing at the rumpled sheets of the bed. There are singed spots where Killian suffered the torment of the anklet. We're lucky the whole thing did not go up in flames.

"This was a very strange wedding night," I murmur.

"Indeed." Killian moves in beside me, his palm settling at my lower back. "It should have been a night of endless pleasure."

His hand drifts up and down, sliding the silken fabric of the nightdress against my skin. The touch is a delicate seduction, an unspoken offer that my body wants to accept. My skin grows warm all over, and arousal twirls through my lower belly.

I'm married to the Prince. But it isn't a real marriage—I was forced to say yes, forced to go through the motions of the wedding. I never chose Brantley. Instead I chose the King, as a way of escaping and claiming power… and then I fell for Killian. Despite his deception, it means something to me that I was drawn to him in both forms. As if we were always meant to be together. In truth, he and I have been connected for longer than I could have imagined, ever since he met my father all those years ago.

We're side by side, facing the bed, but I turn toward him, letting my body brush against his. Killian's breath quickens slightly, and his lips part as he gazes down at me.

His palms land at my waist, the gentlest of touches. He gathers the silky material slowly, exposing my bare legs a little at a time, until I lift my arms, a mute request for him to remove the nightgown. He draws it over my head, flings it away, then glides both hands up my sides, following the curves of my body.

He's wearing a suit and I'm naked except for a pair of lace panties, and somehow I find the contrast wildly titillating. Killian sweeps both hands over the fullness of my breasts with a low moan of admiration, and my nipples peak in response.

"These are so beautiful," he whispers, ducking to take one between his lips for a moment. His tongue dances around my nipple, and I quiver at the sensation of pleasure trickling between my legs.

Killian straightens again and pulls me against him, running both hands down my back, slipping them beneath my panties so he can cup my ass. He strokes both cheeks, as if he's relishing the smooth curves, and then he squeezes lightly. I tremble against him.

Tonight I'm not the girl who stepped on a King's throat. I will be her again, sometime. But right now, I don't want to be the dominant one. I don't want to decide anything or rule anything. I simply want to be cherished, touched, and savored by someone who has proven his love for me.

As if he can hear my thoughts, Killian sinks to his knees. He slides my panties down my legs, and I step out of them.

He touches me with his fingers first—one fingertip tracing the seam of my sex, parting it for him. He dips in, coating his finger with my wetness. Then he looks up at me and puts that finger in his mouth.

I inhale as a little thrill pulses through my clit.

Killian smiles and uses both his thumbs to pull back the lips of my sex, exposing the sensitive bits in between. He leans in and lets his warm breath flow over my pussy.

Then his tongue flicks against my clit.

I gasp. He does it again, longer this time, the tip of his tongue flickering over the tender nub until I'm so excruciatingly sensitive I can barely breathe.

"Killian," I gasp. "Killian, Killian…"

He presses his whole mouth against me then, lips and jaws moving as if he wants to eat me whole, and all the while that wicked tongue swirls and darts in, swirls and darts in, over and over. Every breath of mine is a sharp sob cut in two—my thighs quiver and I press myself convulsively against his face, trying to find release.

Killian pauses, and I nearly cry with desperation—but then he strides to the bed, vanishing all his own clothes as he does so. He stretches himself out on the undamaged side of the sheets and beckons to me. "Ride my face, Sin."

"But… how… I've never…"

"Sshhh," he soothes me. "You'll love it, trust me. I'll help you."

Cautiously I climb onto the bed and kneel astride his face, but I stay above him, nervous about settling into position.

"Don't hover, darling." He lifts his head and gives my wet pussy a quick kiss. "Sit on my face. Rub against me. Use me."

That swift press of his lips makes me so desperate that I need no further encouragement. I lower myself and rock my hips, rubbing my pussy against his face. Killian moans into my sex, his tongue thrashing deliciously as he tastes me. Then he grasps my waist and lifts me up for a moment.

"Would you like the King instead?" he asks. "His mouth and his beard are better for this."

I almost say yes, but then I look down at his sweet face and his lavender eyes, glowing with lust and with love for me.

"No," I tell him. "Not the King this time. I want you, exactly as you are."

Joy floods his gaze, and he pulls me down over his mouth. He wraps both arms around my hips and works me against him with such voracious enthusiasm that I can't stand it, I can't bear it. I reach forward and grab the bedpost, bracing myself as I grind against his mouth, as he nuzzles deeper into me. I come with a searing cry, gripping the bedpost and his hair for dear life, riding his face urgently as the orgasm commands my whole body.

When it tapers off, I move back, letting him breathe. His face is damp and flushed, his lips glistening, his eyes shining like lavender stars.

I'm astride his chest now, but I move even farther back, until I feel the tip of his cock bump against my swollen pussy. I reach behind me, grab his length, and slide him right inside me.

He gives a startled cry, and his hands fly to my waist instinctively. "Oh fuck," he whimpers. "How does this feel so good?"

I smile, delighted by that whimper. Something about the loss of his control turns me on like nothing else.

"Show me how the Fae fuck," I murmur, tracing one of his nipples with my fingertip.

A low groan, almost a growl, thrums through his chest, and a feral light gleams in his eyes. The next second he's tipping us both

over, rolling me onto my back. His cock slips out of me, but he guides it back in immediately, groaning as he achieves a depth I've never felt before. I suck in a quick breath, eyes wide, as he starts to fuck me.

I have never seen anything so beautiful as Killian's slender body braced over mine, glowing pale in the gloom, every toned muscle standing out as he fucks me with all the violence of his deepest nature. There's a savagery in his movements, a feral need mingling with the all-consuming love in his eyes. Even when he isn't in the King's form, the wolf is still there. It was always him.

His eyes are violet torches and his purple hair falls loose over his forehead as he drives deeper into me. He fills me up so perfectly, fits the space inside me just right, and I'm full, I'm healed, I'm safe *and* free, and I let go, moaning and panting and saying his name in a shrill, breathless voice I've never heard myself use before.

"Killian," I gasp. "I'm going to come again. Harder, please, harder… I'm coming, I'm co—"

I scream when the orgasm hits. I claw his back, and he kisses me with a snarl of primal pleasure. Then he shoves in hard, his body convulsing slightly as he releases deep inside me. A long, ragged groan emerges from his throat, and then he kisses me once more, tenderly.

That kiss fractures the last tiny shards of doubt in my soul. I go limp beneath him, my nerveless arms still flung around his neck. All my defenses are gone, and I am his entirely.

"I trust you," I whisper.

He meets my eyes, a startled delight in his gaze. "You do?"

I nod, giving him a tearful smile.

He relaxes against me with a relieved moan. "I love you more than I can say."

I whisper it back to him, and then we lie there awhile without speaking. But we both know that the bliss cannot last… not yet.

"We have bodies to deal with and annulments to achieve," I murmur at last.

"I've been thinking about that," Killian responds. "I believe I have a rather clever plan to resolve all our problems at once."

"When, exactly, did you concoct this plan?"

"Not while I was sheathed in your darling little cunt, if that's what you're worried about." He gives my pussy a playful smack with his hand. "God-stars, I could stay in bed with you for days." He squishes my breast with his fingers, then kisses the soft flesh. "Look at you. You're a dream."

"And you're not totally detestable."

"Not totally detestable?" He grins. "Such high praise. I can die happy now."

He moves his hand between my legs again, his fingers rippling through my folds and swirling over my clit. I go still, prey to the tantalizing sensation.

Killian brushes his mouth against my cheek, his tone tinged with amusement. "You're becoming so sweetly wet for me again. I think you'd come a third time if I kept doing this. Unfortunately, my lovely Sin, we are out of time. Your husband will wake soon, and I cannot be naked in bed with you when he does."

"I hate it when you're right," I grumble, rolling away from him. "Fine. Tell me your plan while I put my nightgown back on."

When he's finished explaining, I have to admit that his scheme is rather brilliant. And it unfolds as smoothly as we could have hoped.

First, he places my sleeping husband in bed beside me, while I pretend to be soundly asleep as well. Within the hour we are both roused by guards and servants, who inform us that my stepmother was caught in the King's suite, bending over his corpse. The King's bodyguards chased her to the top floor of the East Wing, where she leaped from a high window, presumably to her death. But no one has been able to locate her body.

The woman they chased was Killian, glamoured to look like Gilda. When he leaped from the top floor window, he simply passed through a portal of his own making and vanished from the guards' sight.

The ruse frames Gilda as a potential reason for the King's death, while leaving open the question of her mysterious comings and goings. The guards outside the Prince's chamber saw my stepmother

enter, yet they did not see her leave, while both Brantley and I swear we have no memory of her being there at all. To make matters more confusing for everyone, the King's bodyguards can't explain how Gilda slipped past them and entered the King's chamber. Those mysterious, along with the use of magic at my wedding, give rise to whispered suspicions that my stepmother was a witch.

Disguised as various servants, guards, and palace officials, Killian is able to control both the investigation and the flow of information. He stirs up rumors among the palace staff, and those rumors soon catch like wildfire among the nobility of the royal city and the people of the surrounding region. All the mamas whose daughters were overlooked by the Prince are eager to have a reason for their disappointment. They begin to mutter among themselves that Gilda must have cast a love spell on the Prince to make him besotted with me, and that my marriage is nothing but a magically contrived trap for His Royal Highness.

Only Killian and I know the truth. And thanks to years of concealing my true emotions from my step-family, I'm able to fake all the feelings people would expect to see from me in such a scenario—confusion, shock, hurt, and anxiety. Beneath it all, I feel guilty for putting Brantley through this ordeal, yet I'm also eager for the day when I'm free to leave his side… a day which arrives quickly, thanks to Killian's skillful manipulation of people both inside and outside the palace.

True to his noble nature, the Prince does not accuse me of foul play with magic or blame me for my stepmother's treachery. But when I ask for the annulment, he agrees that it would be best for both of us. We approach the Bishop of Fate with our request just two days after our wedding, and the Bishop grants the annulment. After we sign the papers, I return the former Queen's ring to her son. "It will look good on Winston's hand," I whisper to him, and he blushes.

As part of the dissolution of our marriage, my stepsisters are expelled from their new quarters at the palace. The servants pack up their belongings, and Brantley orders a carriage for them.

Neither of my stepsisters seem to truly grasp the fact that their mother is gone. They seem to believe that she will turn up again to domineer and direct them. And of course, rather than going gracefully back to Eisling House, Vashli sulks, while Amisa wails, "I don't want to leave! Please don't make us go, Your Highness. The thought of Mother having some sort of dark magic—it's absurd, it's not true! Oh Cinders, you ruin *everything*!"

They're used to blaming me for everything that displeases them. In this case, I suppose the blame is warranted, and I take a secret satisfaction in that.

The palace guards have difficulty persuading my stepsisters to proceed to the carriage, but eventually their curses and protests fade as they exit the front hall of the palace.

Brantley, who has been quiet during the entire ordeal, turns to me. "You're welcome to stay, Celinda. Even though we are no longer husband and wife, I consider you a friend."

I take his hand in mine, squeezing it affectionately. "You are too good for this kingdom, Your Highness. Thank you for offering, but I'll go with my stepsisters, just for a little while, to get them settled. After that, I think I'll do some traveling."

His gaze brightens. "I have some very informative books on travel, if you'd like to borrow them."

I laugh and kiss his cheek. "Rule well, my dear friend."

"Will you come to the coronation next week?" he inquires hopefully. "I need someone to stand at my side."

"My presence would only stir up rumors again. That isn't what you need right now, as you begin governing the kingdom. Besides, you already have someone to stand beside you." I jerk my head slightly toward his bodyguard, standing a few paces away.

Brantley flushes and smiles. "I suppose you're right. And I feel the presence of my father with me, too. The words he spoke at our wedding meant so much to me."

I remember those last words, spoken not by the King himself, but by a kind-hearted Faerie who knew exactly what Brantley needed to hear from his father.

Killian has been busy for the past two days, guiding the events he set in motion, watching them unfold and interfering as needed. But I know that as soon as I leave the palace, I'll see him again. So it's with anticipation rather than sadness that I bid Brantley a final farewell and descend the steps that have become so familiar to me.

The roof of the carriage is piled high with bundles of things my sisters refused to relinquish, which Brantley graciously allowed them to keep. When I climb inside, Amisa is sobbing and Vashli is hurling vicious insults at her, at me, at the Prince, at the world.

The moment the carriage door closes, I speak to both of them in my sharpest tone. "I'm going back with you, but I'm not staying at Eisling House."

"What?" Amisa blinks at me with huge, tear-filled eyes.

"You're both adults," I say. "You have the money Father left, and the rest of the money Gilda won. If you sell the treasures that the Prince let you keep, you should be able to make the necessary repairs to the house and the barn. Beyond that, the two of you will have to do actual work to support yourselves. It will be good for you. The labor of a household was never meant to fall on one person—it is supposed to be shared, a healthy exercise in maturity rather than an overwhelming burden. You'll need to learn that, because I won't be around to do everything for you."

"How fucking dare you," seethes Vashli. "You have nothing. Where will you go? What will you do?"

"That's no longer any of your business," I reply.

"You say we'll have to *work*?" exclaims Amisa shrilly. "What kind of work?"

"First of all, you'll have to tend the garden and the animals," I say. "I expect you to take excellent care of them, do you understand? If you have questions, check with Worden or ask someone in town. During the drive home, I will explain to you everything I usually do, and I suggest you listen closely."

For the next half hour, I give my stepsisters a long lecture, the length and detail of which would make Brantley proud. By the time we pull up in front of Eisling House, both of them are staring at me,

astonished, clearly taken aback by the sheer amount of labor I was doing all by myself.

I glance out the window at the house where I grew up, the house where I was trapped for so many years, the house where my father spent his final miserable days. Then my gaze lands on a tall male figure lounging against the front door. He's in Fae form—purple hair, pointed ears, and all. Despite the gray skies and freezing temperature, he isn't wearing a coat—another sign that he's not human.

My stomach does a happy little flip, and once I start grinning, I can't stop. I leap out of the carriage and run to him, heedless of my stepsisters' questions and exclamations.

Killian runs down the steps, and I race into his open arms. He lifts me off my feet and twirls me around, and I laugh, carried away with the joy of finally being free, and being together at last. I'm done with the palace, with this house, with my step-family. I have a new love and a new family, and with Killian's magic, I can go anywhere.

When I glance over my shoulder, I notice the palace coachman stealing glances in our direction while he unloads the luggage. Vashli is marching toward us, fury in her gait, while Amisa lags behind, looking fearful.

"Who is that?" Vashli yells at me, then points a finger at Killian. "What *are* you?"

Killian's eyes glitter dangerously. "Someone who should destroy you where you stand, for the way you've treated the woman I love."

Vashli halts. Amisa bumps into her, then clings to her sister's arm.

"I'm going to the barn for a minute," I say.

"I'll be right here," Killian replies, still glaring at my stepsisters.

Taking another look at the two of them, I mutter to Killian, "I hate leaving it all in their hands, especially the animals."

"I know. But most animals from this realm don't last long in Faerie. Except for cats. Cats are always a little more Fae than other animals. Some kinds of dogs adapt well, too."

His comment gives me an idea, so after saying my goodbyes to the cows, the goats, the chickens, and Lord Hogmorton, I run into the house and fetch a tin of fish. Then I crouch on the back step and open it.

Within moments, Sophie comes slinking through the snowy bushes.

"There you are," I murmur. "I've always wondered how you can hear or smell food even when you're nowhere nearby. Maybe it's cat magic."

I snatch her up, and she meows a dignified protest, but she doesn't struggle as I carry her back out front and show her to Killian. When he reaches for her, she hisses at him.

He grins. "That's how you reacted to me when we first met."

"And she'll warm up to you, just like I did."

"My father will love her. I'll send you two through a portal first, and then I'll make one for myself. Close your eyes when you first step through, and don't open them until I get there. Do you have everything you need?"

I nod, conscious of the slight weight of my pocket watch around my neck. It's the only treasure I want to take with me. "I'm ready."

The carriage has left, and my sisters are standing on the snowy path, surrounded by their luggage. They've gone silent, and I'm curious what Killian said to them in my absence to achieve that effect.

I have no desire to touch them or hug them. I've done the most degrading and personal tasks for them for years, and perhaps I should feel some vague connection, some faint sense of loss at the thought of never seeing them again. But I only feel joy.

"Do better," I tell them. "And take care of each other, not just yourselves."

Vashli only stares at me, her gaze filled with rage and rebuke. But Amisa nods.

When Killian creates the portal, I don't tell my stepsisters goodbye. I simply bury my face in Sophie's fur and walk through.

Killian told me to close my eyes, but I can't resist peeking. I expected to end up in Finias's candy shop or in the same bedroom

as before, but instead I step into a brilliant garden with twisting purple trees, silver foliage, and blue grass. Glowing amber crystals sprout directly from the earth, and tiny multicolored fireflies wink on and off in the gloom beneath the trees.

Every tree, every leaf, every blade of grass is so sharply defined, so violently vivid, and the overall scene is so beautiful that I can't handle it all at once. I shut my eyes again, breathing in the comforting scent of Sophie. Her body rumbles as she purrs. Clearly she's pleased with our surroundings.

Killian's voice enters my consciousness. "Are you alright?"

"I peeked."

"Of course you did." There's a smile in his voice. "Faerie can be overwhelming at first. You'll get used to it, though." His hands descend on my shoulders, and he turns me around. "Take one quick look, just for a moment."

I open my eyes, then shut them again. In that split-second, I glimpsed the most beautiful cottage I've ever seen, built of dark gray and purple stones, seamed with pale mortar and topped with a pink tiled roof.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"This is my house," Killian replies. "Did you think I lived with my parents?"

"Well… yes."

He chuckles. "No, darling. This place is all mine. And yours, too, for as long as you like."

"Will I have to clean it?"

"Not unless you want to. I have spells for that."

"Thank Fate."

With a laugh, he picks me up and carries both me and Sophie inside. Once the door is closed, I open my eyes and look around the front room of the cottage, pleasantly surprised by how tidy and spacious it is.

Killian puts us down, and Sophie immediately springs from my arms and prowls off to inspect her new domain. I turn to my Faerie godfather, who's looking at me with grave sincerity in his lavender eyes.

"I hope you'll feel safe here," he says. "This realm can be dangerous, so I wouldn't recommend you wander too far on your own—but if you ever feel trapped, I will take you anywhere you want. If you ever wish to leave me, I will shower you with wealth and set you up for life in the destination of your choice. You will never lose your freedom."

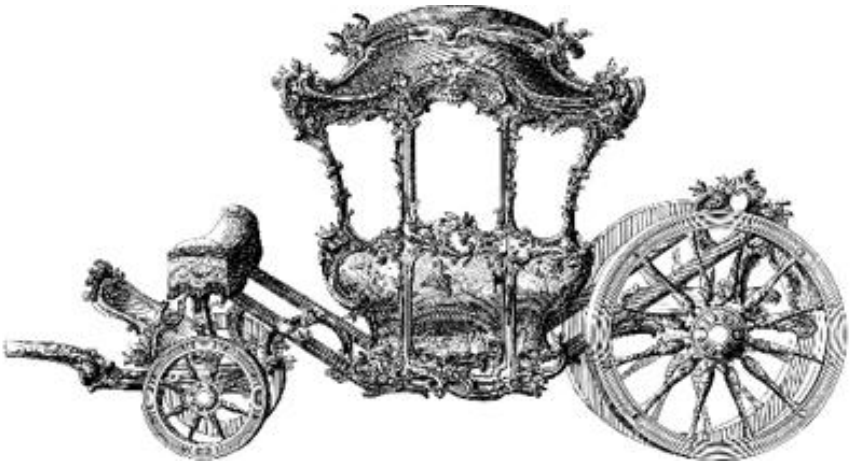
It's exactly what I need to hear. But my heart is too full to tell him that, so I simply rise on tiptoe and wrap both my arms around his neck.

"Welcome home, Sin," he whispers.

And only then does it truly sink into my soul—that despite any dangers of Faerie or the future, I'm finally, truly safe. I'm in the arms of someone who loves me more than himself.

So *this* is love, after all. Danger and safety, freedom and trust.

Every tightly-wound nerve in my body relaxes, and every knot of tension dissolves and flows out of me as I kiss my rescuer, my best friend—the thief who stole my heart, and the king who rules it.



Read on for Bonus Chapters from Killian's point of view…

# 1

The summons reverberates through my body like a drumbeat. I haven't been called in almost a year, but I recognize the sensation instantly. One of the charmed objects I've handed out in the mortal world has been activated.

Good timing, because I'm weary of this party. My cousin Torin insisted I accompany him tonight, even though I was feeling morose and useless and I would rather have stayed home. As it turned out, the gathering he had in mind was practically an orgy—not my scene, but what Torin thinks I need.

I enjoy elegant parties with fine feasts and beautiful clothes. I'm less interested in mushrooms, group sex, and heady cocktails than Torin is, so I've been lounging on a sofa, watching him grind with every available female—and most of the males too. Torin is more like *my* father than his… or at least he resembles my father in his younger days, when he was careless and wild. Sometimes I envy my cousin. Not a thought in his head but having fun.

For my part, I would like my life to mean something. So I rejoice inwardly when the magical summons drums through my brain and blood.

Someone *needs* me, at last.

I lunge off the couch and approach Torin, touching his shoulder. He whirls around and almost kisses me on the mouth before he realizes who I am. He laughs, wine-drunk and wicked.

"Come to join the fun at last, Killian?" He hooks an arm around my neck and pulls me into a side-hug.

"I have to go."

"Spoilsport."

"You'll have plenty of sport without me." I ruffle his black hair. Even though Torin is a head taller than me, he's two decades younger. My mother and his are sisters, and our fathers are cousins. The circumstances of my birth were unusual, but his birth was even more dramatic, and he possesses a unique set of gifts as a result.

Since both of us have human blood and unusual talents, we've always been close. Sometimes I feel closer to him than to my older sister Úna.

Torin looks at me keenly, a momentary awareness cutting through his haze of mushrooms and wine. "You've been summoned."

"Yes."

"Be careful." His vivid blue eyes pierce mine.

"Always."

"Good, because if you die, I'll be stranded on this island, and I'll be forced to barter my gorgeous body for enough magic to get home."

"I'll be back for you tomorrow," I promise.

"I'll fuck an extra girl on your behalf." He winks and turns back to his companions.

A few Faeries bid me goodbye as I make my way out of the crystal mine. Torin and I are not on the main continent of Faerie, but on one of the outlying islands. Thanks to my gift, I can travel easily from Faerie to the mortal realm, or from point to point within either realm. It's a talent I occasionally offer to my uncle Lirannon, High King of Faerie, when he needs to travel himself or if he must send an ambassador to an outlying province. But most often I travel alone, or I bring Torin with me. Without my cousin, I'm afraid I might become rather contemplative and dull.

The crystal mines of Sybaris Island are one of my cousin's favorite places to experience a thoroughly debauched revel. The semi-precious stones sprouting from cavern walls thrum with sensual energy, their colors growing warmer and richer as the party continues and the activities turn more lecherous. Any orgasms experienced in their vicinity are enhanced and echoed, lending a secondary thrill of pleasure to everyone within the crystals' sphere of influence.

I leave the pink and orange glow of the mines and walk a few steps into the dark forest. The frenzied music, the laughter, and the chaos fade as I turn my attention inward and focus on the spell that's summoning me.

Now that I'm alone in the quiet, I can feel the agony of the one who summoned me. This mortal has suffered deeply. They are teetering on the brink of ultimate despair, almost ready to give up on everything, including life itself.

They need me.

When my eyes are closed, I can see my destination in my mind, and I can decide where I want to appear. In this case, the location is a barn, and I choose a dark corner as my entry point. Then I create a portal and step through.

I emerge in a gloomy, rundown building, illuminated by a couple of lanterns. The smell of cows and goats hangs thickly in the steamy air. A young woman moves among the animals, speaking to them in the sweetest, softest tones I've ever heard. Her voice is like a blanket, like the warm sun in the dead of winter, like a tender flower blooming out of black ice.

For a moment I simply watch her. It's a pleasure to observe her interacting with the beasts. She seems like a gentle soul.

She milks one of the cows, then inspects another cow, touching its flank where a wound festers. "That looks painful, sweet thing," she murmurs. "We'll have to get the farrier out here to look at you. Not sure where we'll find the money to pay him, but…"

I can't bear the ache in her voice, the strain of worry and deprivation. Now is the perfect moment to introduce myself and allay those worries.

"If you'll allow me," I say quietly, stepping forward.

The girl startles visibly, covering her mouth, but she doesn't scream. "What the actual fuck?"

Her voice is sharper now, almost caustic, and her body goes rigid with defensiveness and suspicion.

I chuckle at the dramatic shift in her personality. "I always try to avoid startling people, but I rarely succeed. Mortals can be so terribly jumpy. You're doing very well though. You haven't screamed yet, so…"

I stretch out my hand toward the cow, intending to heal it, but the girl grabs a pitchfork and pokes it at me. The sharp tines slash my clothing and scrape against my skin.

Well then. She has far more spirit and fire than I first gave her credit for. My cock stirs slightly at the sight of her poised there, pitchfork at the ready and blue eyes afire. She is definitely prepared to impale me.

It takes a few careful words and a demonstration of my magic to ease her fears a little. During the conversation that follows, I try to ignore my body's reaction to her, determined to focus solely on why I've been summoned. She's in trouble, but she doesn't trust me enough to tell me everything. Instead, she asks to attend a royal ball.

My mind begins to whirl instantly, playing through various colors that might complement her skin tone, designing the most fabulous gowns I can imagine. This job is going to be delightful. Not only do I have the loveliest of subjects, but she wishes me to do what I do best—design clothing for her. I couldn't have chosen a more perfect task to pull me out of the rut I've been in lately.

That's what I'll fix my mind on—the creative element of the mission. Not the fact that this girl is violently angry and in excruciating emotional pain. Not the fact that the more savagely she speaks to me, the more I want to pull her close and kiss her until she melts—or, if she prefers, allow her to spend her rage on my body through a brutal fucking.

Torin would applaud such lecherous thoughts. "So proud of you," he would croon.

But I am a being of great power, in proximity to a desperate young woman. I'm not above flirting shamelessly with her, but I won't fuck her unless she conceives of the idea and suggests it herself.

When I return to the crystal mine, I don't go inside. Instead I wander the woods until dawn arrives, and then I enter the cavern, pluck Torin's sleeping body out of the nest of naked Fae he has made for himself, and carry him home.

# 2

The girl doesn't want to kiss me. She barely pecks at my mouth, and I have to persuade her to yield to a proper kiss, which is necessary to seal our bargain. Faeries operate through systems of bartering and exchange, particularly when dealing with humans. It's our nature.

She hasn't been kissed before. And yet, once she yields a little, kissing comes naturally to her. I can sense the awakening of her body, her eagerness to enjoy the pleasure of my mouth as long as possible. She speaks to me with every swirl of her tongue, begs for more with her quickened breath. When I slip my tongue into her mouth, my brain bursts into a tempest of stars and whirls away into a dazzling void where nothing exists but the two of us.

*I could kiss her forever*. I've never had that thought about anyone else.

I pull back, determined to focus on the task at hand. "There. A proper exchange has been made, and the bargain is struck. Now take off your clothes."

She recoils. "What?"

"I could take them off you with magic, but I thought that might be rather rude. Wouldn't you prefer to do it yourself?"

"And why would I undress for you?" She sidesteps, casting a glance at the iron poker beside the fireplace. I suppress a grin at her audacity, to assume she would stand a chance against someone with my Fae strength and magic.

"I need to see your body, so I can create the right look for you," I tell her. "This shapeless sack you're wearing conceals your form."

"It's not a shapeless sack," she snaps. "I'm not comfortable undressing for someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"A man—a male—who is very…" She blushes fiercely.

She thinks I'm beautiful. Of course she does—the Fae are all beautiful. Some part of me sinks a little at the realization that if she ever did crave me, it would be because of my immortal loveliness, not my heart or my mind.

Perhaps another face would allow her to like me for myself.

I try on various glamours for her, but she claims to be most comfortable with my true form.

At last she concedes to my request and disrobes, leaving only her underclothes in place. They're so threadbare they barely conceal anything, and it's all I can do to center my thoughts on my goal—to craft the perfect gown for her body. I am not here to desire her, to lust for her… *fuck*, her breasts are perfectly shaped, but also *fuck*, she has so many scars. Unmistakable signs of cruelty and abuse mar her skin, old wounds long past the ability of any magic to heal them. I want to kiss each one and promise that nothing will ever harm her again…

"Stop staring at me and *listen*," she snaps.

I obey, trying not to let my expression show the anger and lust that are battling in my heart.

We make the arrangements for the evening, and I explain the limitations of my magic to her. I have often longed for the energy of a full-blooded Fae, but at least I have my portal ability, which is a distinct and valuable talent. And the girl doesn't seem to mind the midnight deadline—she is grateful for anything I can do for her,

though she tries to conceal her gratitude beneath layers of hardness and anger.

I allow myself one small indulgence—touching her hair—before I transform her. Once her entire outfit is done, I step back, enjoying the amazement on her face. For a moment she is utterly without defense, and I see straight to the soft, wounded heart of a girl who has always longed for love and for beautiful things.

"There now," I tell her gently. "Some of my best work, I think. Of course I had a lovely subject, which helps."

She casts me a wary glance. "No sweet talk."

"Not even one tiny compliment?"

"Not one."

"Very well." I'm about to tease her more, but then I realize I've omitted something vital. "Shoes! I forgot the shoes."

I'm not the most skilled with footwear, so even as my thoughts coalesce into physical form, creating a silver slipper around her foot, I drop to one knee and grab her ankle so I can inspect the result and ensure a comfortable fit. But my fingers encounter a metal band that scorches my skin like fire, and I yank my hand back quickly with a startled cry.

The girl draws back, a furtive awareness in her gaze.

"What is this?" I ask.

Anguish shines in her eyes, but her lips compress, sealing off any words. I've witnessed something similar before, most notably when I tricked my chatterbox of a sister into eating a silencing spell in the form of a cookie so she couldn't reveal the plans for our mother's birthday celebration. Unfortunately the spell prevented Úna from saying anything at all. She was furious, and I was firmly reprimanded by my father, whose eyes sparkled with merriment the entire time he was lecturing me. It took him a while to find the reversal spell and set her tongue free. I've always suspected he was slow about it on purpose, so he could enjoy the peace and quiet a bit longer.

In this case, the imposed silence concerns rather than amuses me. "You can't talk about it?" I ask the girl.

She shakes her head.

"You can't tell me what it does, or who placed it on you?"

Again she shakes her head, while her eyes sparkle with tears. In a voice barely louder than a breath, she says, "I need my carriage."

At that wounded whisper, my heart shatters, and anger rises from the rubble, twining red and ruinous through my chest. I stand up, buoyed by a new goal—to find out who hurt this girl and make them pay in blood.

She must recognize the fierce purpose on my face, because she cringes a little, wrapping her hand around the pocket watch at her throat, the talisman that summoned me. It's an object of comfort for her.

"If you want to keep wearing that, I'll glamour it to look like a fine necklace," I offer. When she agrees, I alter the visible appearance of the watch and chain. Unluckily for me, the newly glamoured jewels make her breasts look even more luscious. I think that effect was unintentional… or perhaps my subconscious willed it so. Either way, I have to tear my gaze from the alluring sight and hustle her outside, where I cover her in a furry wrap so I won't be tempted to stare anymore.

As the cold hits her lungs, she coughs. The sound is ragged, with a rasping wheeze that worries me. I shall have to figure out some way to heal her, and that could get awkward.

I can't heal humans the same way I can heal animals. For me to be able to heal a human, they must swallow a certain intimate essence of mine. And she seems like the type of woman who would either flee or lop off my head if I suggested she consume my cum in any way.

Fuck, I'm harder than ever at the thought. Thankfully she is distracted by the sparkling carriage I've conjured for her and she doesn't seem to notice the prominent bulge I'm sporting.

"I have never seen anything so beautiful," she says, staring at the coach. As if she assumed magic could only craft dangerous or deadly things. I don't blame her for the prejudice, especially now that I know she is entrapped by a magical anklet whose purpose I don't yet understand.

Though I don't fault her for the assumption, I can't resist correcting it. "Magic is not inherently good or evil. It can be used to help or to harm, and I wish you were not so familiar with the latter. But for tonight, think of nothing except enjoying yourself. Dance, drink, and flirt with handsome gentlemen."

That last line is forced, insincere, but I doubt she can tell. The instant she's in the carriage, I create a portal and step into my cousin's private parlor. Torin still lives in his suite of rooms at his parents' palace, where he makes himself useful in various ways—just useful enough so that King Lir and Queen Louisa don't toss him out on his ass.

Out of deference to my cousin, I never appear directly in his bedroom. I suppose it's also out of caution, since I never know what I'll encounter in Prince Torin's private chamber. The image of a Racer hybrid with its twiglike arm stuffed up my cousin's ass is still painfully fresh in my mind, though it's been years since I witnessed that odd coupling.

Standing in the darkened parlor, I rap on Torin's bedroom door.

"Confound you, Killian," he groans. "Come the fuck in."

I enter to find him in bed, right where I left him, except now he's buried under a mountain of blankets. "How did you know it was me?"

"You always knock the same way. Did you bring me wine?"

"No. You had too much last night."

"My head is splitting open. Did you at least bring something for healing? Or pain relief?"

"You have servants for that." I drape myself on his bed.

As someone born to a Fae and a god-touched human, I have my own weaknesses. Torin's human weakness is a propensity for ailments like hangovers and the occasional bout of sickness. It takes far more alcohol to produce a hangover for him than it would for a normal human, but the fact that he suffers from overconsumption at all is supremely irritating to him. He also heals more slowly and feels temperature changes more dramatically than most Fae.

"Pull the bell cord for me, would you, Kil?" he mumbles, his face half-sunk in the pillow.

I reach over and tug it. Moments later a blue orb floats into the room, and Torin speaks his request to it. The orb bobs once, then glides back out of the room, zooming off to find a servant to fulfill the order.

"I have a problem," I mutter to Torin.

"Is it your voice? Because I'm finding that extremely annoying at the moment."

"It's a girl."

Torin lifts his head slightly. "A girl?"

"The human girl I was called to help."

"Go on, give me details."

I deliver an abbreviated account of my interactions with the girl. "And then she got into the carriage, and I left."

He's sitting up now, staring at me as if I've gone mad. "You *left*?"

"What else should I have done?"

"You sent your emotionally wounded protégé off to a palace ball. Your *virgin* protégé. She's there unprotected, vulnerable, a prime target for a lustful vagabond such as myself… what the fuck were you thinking, Kil? Why are you still here? Go to the palace, wear a glamour, and watch her. Protect her like you're fucking supposed to."

"Isn't that too overbearing? Shouldn't I—"

"Go, for the god-stars' sake!" He brightens as a servant enters his chamber, carrying a tray. "Ah, thank the fates, here's my wine and my breakfast."

I leap up and snatch the goblet of wine off the servant's tray. "It's for your own good," I tell Torin when he protests. "I need it more than you do."

As I swallow the wine, I turn my thoughts toward the palace where my protégé is attending the royal ball. I've never been there, but I possess a unique mutation of my mother's god-touched gift, the Wretched Sight. When paired with my ability to create portals, I can use the Wretched Sight to perceive my destination and its surrounding area in my mind. I can locate the palace, perceive it,

even mentally skim through its hallways and rooms to decide on a good entry point.

Setting down the empty wine cup, I take one breath in Torin's room and the next breath in a broom closet of the palace's central wing.

I step into the hallway, and as luck would have it, there's a maid passing by. She's alone, no one else in sight, so I flip open one of my rings to reveal a tiny compartment full of glittering dust. I step in front of the maid and blow the dust in her face. Within a second, she's sinking to the floor, fast asleep.

I arrange the maid's unconscious form in the closet, with her head resting comfortably against a stack of folded cloths. Then I drag a rack of sheets forward to conceal her, so she won't be seen or disturbed. She'll sleep for several hours and awaken refreshed. Meanwhile, I can take on her physical appearance and keep an eye on my protégé.

Navigating the palace is easy enough thanks to my Wretched Sight, and soon I find myself in a wide hallway graced with exquisite paintings. My mother would love to see them. There's an especially fine portrait of an older human with silver hair standing beside a younger male, presumably his son. Both are wearing crowns. Must be the King and the Prince.

As I pass by an open door, my Fae ears catch a strange noise—a gargling, choking sound, like someone being strangled.

Perhaps I should keep walking and not interfere in whatever lurid palace drama might be unfolding. But if there's something dangerous going on in the palace, something that could threaten my protégé, shouldn't I know about it?

As I debate my course of action, someone wheezes, "Help!"

Decision made, I hurry through the doors into the room beyond —a library, judging by all the books.

"Where are you?" I call out.

No one answers, so I inhale through my nose, trying to identify the person's location by smell. Beneath the fragrance of the winter roses by the window, I can smell a mature human male with a rich,

strong scent, but there's another odor twined with his natural one—an odor of wrongness, of death.

I follow the scent between two rows of bookshelves to a curtained alcove with a padded bench seat—one of many reading nooks along the library's rear wall.

On the floor in front of the alcove lies a handsome human male with a grizzled chin and silver hair. His face is purple, his eyes fixed and expressionless.

It's the man from the hallway portrait—the King. And he's dead. I know it even before I touch him. There's a rank finality to the scent of his body—a bitter reek of something gone wrong, deep inside. This isn't a death I can reverse or a wound I can heal.

My mind races through possible scenarios. If the King is discovered dead, that will certainly put an end to the night's festivities, which means my protégé's evening will be ruined.

That's unacceptable to me. She deserves a night of luxury, dancing, and delight after the horrors that have plagued her life. I may not know what all the horrors are, but I know they exist. I saw their marks on her body, and I perceived the hurt in her eyes, clear as the title of the book lying beside the King—*Honorable States of Governance, Succession, and Acquisition*. Godsfuck, that looks dull.

A plan forms in my mind—too quickly perhaps, but time is short. There don't seem to be any bodyguards around, but a guest, a servant, or a guard could enter the library at any moment. I must make haste.

A quick investigation reveals that the padded seat of the reading nook can be lifted, revealing an empty compartment. All I have to do is place a preservation spell on the King and stuff him inside the bench seat. Preserving his body will create a persistent drain on my energy, but it can't be helped. I can't have him getting smelly and betraying his whereabouts.

Once the night is over and my protégé has had her fun, I'll portal the King to his bed, and the servants can find his body in the morning.

It's only a slight delay in the discovery of his death. Nothing dreadful or inexcusable.

I cast the spell, then cram his body into the compartment. It takes some maneuvering, since he is tall and broad, but at last I manage it.

As I close the bench seat, another thought occurs to me. What if people begin looking for the King? If he's missing long enough, the palace staff will become alarmed. It's not enough just to hide him—I need to *replace* him, temporarily. Just for tonight.

He was settled on this bench, reading. I can sit quietly and read, too—and if his bodyguards come looking for him, I can surely act the part well enough to fool them. After all, I've lived in proximity to royalty all my life.

To hold such a glamour for hours, I need to do a bit of blood magic. It's a simple matter to retrieve a little blood from the King's body, drawn from a shallow cut I make along his inner thigh. Using that essence, I create the glamour, cloaking myself in the King's tangible and visible form so that I will look, feel, and smell like him. Thanks to the preservation spell I placed on his body, I can obtain more of his blood if I need it. But I don't anticipate this ruse lasting past dawn.

I planned to shadow my protégé and observe her tonight, but unfortunately that plan will have to change. I can't enter the ballroom glamoured as the King. There would be too many people to greet, too many acquaintances I should know. Gleaning the knowledge to successfully fool them all would require spells I don't have time to cast. So my purpose must shift from spying on the girl to remaining here in the library, keeping the King alive, and ensuring that the ball proceeds without interruption.

I swap the dull book the King was reading with a more entertaining one, and I settle myself in the reading alcove with the curtains half-drawn. Engrossed in the book, I barely notice time passing until I hear soft footsteps in the library.

"Where are you?" murmurs a voice, and my entire body illuminates… literally. My skin is fucking *glowing*, and I have to rein in the surge of emotion engendered by that voice.

Ever since I heard the girl speaking to the animals in the barn, her voice became a core memory of mine. I'd know it anywhere. But

I didn't expect my body to react so visibly to the sound.

The glow happens to me now and then, usually when I'm with my whole family and I'm feeling especially beloved, joyful, and safe among them. It has never happened with a human.

I've barely managed to conceal the effect when four slim fingers curl around the curtain of my alcove and draw it back.

The girl gasps a little at the sight of me. "I beg your pardon. I didn't know anyone was here."

God-stars, she's exquisite—even more so in that dress.

I'm smiling at her—I can't help it. But I must remember whose face I'm wearing, and the effect it will likely have on her.

For a moment I consider telling her the truth, but she would be alarmed if I explained that the King has died and I've taken his place. She might even think I killed him, no matter what I say to the contrary. Her distrust of magic runs deep.

No, the best course of action is to *be* the King, to carry on the ruse, even with her.

"Your Majesty." She curtsies.

"No need for all that," I assure her. "Who are you looking for?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Earlier, you said, 'Where are you?' Are you searching for someone?"

"Oh… not exactly. I… well… I was looking for a book." Her eyes widen slightly as she notices the salacious contents of the novel lying open on my thigh. She glances at me, a blush tinging her cheeks—but in her eyes I read interest, not condemnation.

"Ever read a book like this?" I ask.

"A woman of good breeding should say no, but… yes."

I'm ridiculously pleased by her admission. "I respect your honesty."

"I should say, I've only read short stories of that kind," she clarifies. "Never an entire book."

"Ah. Well, the story is good. It's meant to titillate, of course, but there's substance beyond that."

Her lips part, and her blush intensifies, but I can tell it isn't embarrassment, exactly. Or if it is, the embarrassment is mingled

with lust. I was already aroused thanks to the delightful tale I was reading, and my arousal is now a full-blown craving, centered boldly on the young woman standing beside me.

She's a mystery, this one. Bound by a magical device, aching for freedom, gifted with beauty, and brimming with suppressed desire. Her scent is warm and honeyed, yet fragile with mortality, like soft petals easily bruised. She is gentle with animals and vicious with me, and I love that dichotomy of her character. It's so fucking intriguing.

Even more intriguing is the way her body language suddenly changes. Her hips tilt provocatively and she begins twirling a lock of glossy golden hair around her finger.

"Do you read books like that often?" she asks.

"Sometimes," I reply honestly. "When I lack companionship."

"I would think that a king could have *companionship* anytime he desires it."

"I could have companions, but I happen to be rather particular about that sort of company."

"Are you?" She cocks an eyebrow. "What kind of person meets the standards of the King?"

I close the book, set it aside, and stand up so I can look down at her. I can smell traces of fear in her delicate scent, but stronger than that is the scent of her arousal. My cock hardens still more, painful in its insistence to be sheathed in the slippery heat of her body.

She asked what my standards are. At the moment, the only standard is *her.*

"It's not something I can define," I say. "I know it when I see it."

"Do you?" Her voice cracks slightly. She's terrified and desperate all at once.

Much as I might wish to, I won't attempt to seduce her. After all, this form might have an undue influence over a servant girl trapped in a life she hates. I should deflect her attention elsewhere, before I do something I'll regret.

"Have you seen our winter roses?" I inquire. "They are something of a specialty here at the palace. A point of pride with our gardeners."

"I saw some. By the windows, when I came in. They were drenched in moonlight."

"Drenched…" Fuck, now I'm wondering if the undergarments I made for her are also drenched beneath the skirts of her gown.

With a mighty effort I turn my mind from that tempting image. "Come with me. You can take a closer look at the roses."

I lead her toward the urns of winter roses, and when she comments on their beauty I agree with her, though I'm not looking at the flowers at all.

I can't seem to break the enchantment she has unwittingly laid over my brain and body, the overwhelming sense that this girl is different than anyone I've ever helped, that once my task is done I won't be able to step out of her life like I did with the others, that I *couldn't* leave her entirely, ever. Now that I've met her, I can't imagine not being near her once in a while, hearing her voice, watching the play of emotions across her face. There is a depth to her character that I ache to explore, even more than I yearn for her body.

What is this magic? Does it have to do with the anklet she wears? Surely not. Judging by the scars on her skin, she is being held and harmed against her will. She doesn't seem like the type to be wielding a love-spelled artifact against me.

Without warning, she touches me—one pale hand at my waist, her tapered fingers resting against my shirt. I can feel the warmth of her palm through the material, against my skin, and it drives me mad instantly.

She tips her face up and whispers, "Will you fuck me?"

Shock blazes through my body, and my cock jumps against the confines of my pants. With difficulty I manage to speak. "Aren't you here for the ball? For the Prince?"

"I came here for your son, yes… but now I'd like to come for you, Your Majesty."

By the god-stars, she's bold. Bold and desperate. There's a wild, rebellious need shining in her eyes, a ferocious lust that won't be denied. And my body responds to her unspoken command.

I pull her close and discard the comb from her hair, letting the silken waves fall free. Beautiful. My hand cups the back of her neck, and she yields, tipping her head back. Like a starved wanderer, I inhale the sweet fragrance unfurling from her warm skin.

This is not what I do. I don't fuck the people who call on me for help. And I certainly don't fuck anyone while in disguise, unless it's a glamour they've requested.

I must not yield to my own lust, yet I can't seem to make myself reject this girl. My heart is pounding violently and my breath bursts hot and heavy from my lungs. I sway forward, pushing my hard cock against her, almost groaning as the friction makes everything blissfully better and yet so much worse.

"Are you doing this because you want to fuck a king?" I ask hoarsely.

"No!" she exclaims, looking up at me. Her voice softens as she breathes against my lips, and I tremble with the overpowering need to kiss her.

"I don't care who you are," she continues. "This is simply a moment in time between strangers. I've been wretchedly miserable and this whole night is a dream, a beautiful one. It has given me hope when I thought all was hopeless. And your touch—the pleasure and freedom we could enjoy together—it's something I need. Something I would beg you for, if my pride would allow it."

I need her to repeat that, to confirm it. "You don't care who I am. A different face, a different body would do just as well for you?"

"Yes. Maybe that's wrong…"

"No," I say. "No, it's right. Let this be a dream between us."

One time. One night. I can give her the release she needs, the liberty she craves.

Just once, because she asked.

# 3

I tease her about her tryst later, when she returns home and I'm back in the form of her Faerie godfather. Even as I watch her blush and squirm, all I want to do is confess everything and beg her to let me taste her pussy again. I've tasted my share of females, but the taste of this human is like a fine wine crafted especially for me. Her arousal was the most delicious liquid, and the very shape of her pussy was so pleasing, so satisfying for my tongue. The way she came for me thrilled not just my body but my brain in a way I can't describe. It was all I could do not to glow in her presence.

And then she let me come inside her.

No one else has ever felt so good wrapped around my cock. I'm ruined for anyone but this woman.

When she asks to attend another ball, my heart sinks, weighed by guilt. If I am to grant this wish for her, I'll have to keep up the pretense and continue being the King, which means performing difficult spellwork so I'll have the knowledge I need to play the role convincingly. It means more blood magic and a constant drain on my energy.

And it means I'll be tempted to fuck her again.

Revealing the truth now would make her rightfully afraid and angry. She would reject all future favors from me… and I can't allow that, because she needs me. Without me, she will continue to be miserable, abused, and hopeless.

I've created this mess. I've trapped us both in a situation that I suspect won't end well. And yet I can't stop thinking about kissing her again. The compulsion grows more insistent the longer I'm in her presence. So when she proposes a bargain that will bind us even closer together, I consent. For every compliment, I'll owe her a favor.

We bind the bargain with a kiss—gentle this time, sweet and soft.

I can't stop the glow. It suffuses my body, radiating from every pore. I'm incandescent in her presence, too weak to resist the adoration flooding my soul.

So I leave. I whisk myself through a portal without even planning my destination, and somehow I end up in Torin's sitting room again.

My cousin is there, wrapped in a velvet robe, drinking and gazing into the fire. When I appear, he startles.

"The fuck, Kil," he mutters. Then his eyes widen. "You're glowing."

"I know." I fling myself onto the sofa opposite his chair. "I think I'm in love. Or I found my mate. Or something. God-stars, I need a drink."

He gestures to a collection of crystal decanters on the low table. "Help yourself."

I pour myself a glass of green-tinted troll whiskey, a black-market variety he's technically not supposed to have. It wrecks my throat on the way down and scorches my belly. I deserve the pain. All the pain.

"Fuck, what have I done," I groan, lying back and pressing one hand to my forehead.

"You fucked her." Torin pulls a licorice stick from a jar on the table and takes a gigantic bite.

I don't respond. Torin has done his share of questionable things, but I think this is worse. I'm not sure I can bear his judgment. Even

though the girl consented to sex with me, even though she said she simply wanted to fuck and *anyone* would do, I can't shake the sense of guilt. Honesty has always been important to me, and by doing this, I am going against one of the prime tenets of my character. My dick has overruled my good sense.

"Why so glum?" Torin asks. "Was she not good?"

I choke out a laugh. "Didn't you hear me? I said—"

"You think you're in love," says Torin sardonically. "I've heard it before, Kil. You fall hard, you're ready to bond with someone, they reject you, and you crumble into despair. Same cycle."

"This one is different."

"You've said that about all of them."

He's right, I have. But with my other lovers, I *wanted* them to be the one for me, and this girl simply *is* the one. She's mine, and I belong to her, whether she knows it or not, whether either of us want it or not.

"I can't explain how I know," I admit. "And I have no time to languish here, moping about it. I have work to do. A mortal kingdom to run."

He arches a brow. "A kingdom? What have you gotten yourself into, Killian?"

I get to my feet and down the rest of the troll whiskey, shuddering at the fiery rush through my throat. "Don't tell my parents, or yours. I'm going to fix this."

"My darling cousin, you've mistaken me for someone who cares one iota about anything that happens in the mortal world," he drawls. "Off with you. Enjoy your machinations and mysteries, while I drown myself in drink and darkness."

I hesitate, sensing a shadow in him that I don't normally perceive. "Are you alright?"

He flashes me a bright smile. "Always."

I'm unconvinced, but time is short. I must fetch supplies for the spells I will have to cast, and then I must make an appearance as the King before his servants and guards begin to panic over his absence.

"I'll be back soon," I tell Torin. "We'll talk."

"Gods, I hope not." He takes another bite of his licorice stick as I walk through my portal.

# 4

By the end of my first full day as the King, I'm exhausted. Thanks to several mind-melding spells, I've managed to gain the information I need to convince everyone of my identity; and thanks to the King's blood, my glamour has held firm. No one suspects the truth of the King's death, and the ball is still on for tonight.

Around midday, I portaled over to my protégé's house and used my Wretched Sight to observe some of the goings-on within. I learned that she has a stepmother and two stepsisters, all of whom treat her terribly. Whenever her stepmother commands her to do something, she cooperates immediately. Her subservience doesn't seem to match the feisty girl I've begun to love. Perhaps it has something to do with that anklet she wears. But I couldn't spare the time to observe them for long, because a king has meetings to attend and obligations to fulfill.

Apparently the King and his son also make it a point to have one meal together each day, so I'm forced to join him for dinner. Contrary to my expectations, Prince Brantley proves to be a pleasant dinner companion. He's full of useful information, the flow of which can be directed with slight nudges to the conversation. Judging from

his behavior toward me, he and his father share a mutual respect and a positive relationship, which makes my task easier.

My bodyguards, Ren and Sevir, are stationed by the wall of the dining room. Brantley's bodyguard Winston lingers nearby as well, never taking his eyes off the Prince. There's a warmth and affection in his gaze that I don't miss, though the Prince doesn't seem to be aware of it.

After the meal, I retire to my chambers under pretext of a headache, and I take the opportunity to portal home to my mother's kitchen in Faerie. Hers is always better supplied than mine, so I'm constantly popping in whenever I need to bake something.

She and my father love baking together, and when Úna and I were children, our family spent many happy hours in the kitchen. My mother taught me how to make meals from the mortal world, and my father taught me how to infuse baked goods or candies with magic. So it's a simple matter for me to whip up a batch of cinnamon rolls and vanilla frosting.

My mother enters the kitchen just as I'm setting one unfrosted cinnamon roll on a small plate.

"I thought I heard someone bumbling around in here," she says, rising on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. "Who's that for?"

"Someone."

She peers at me, and I'm suddenly fearful she might see straight into my heart and perceive the deception in which I'm engaged. Guilt makes me avert my gaze from hers.

"Killian," she says quietly. "Are you alright?"

"Of course." I force myself to smile at her, but she immediately shakes her head.

"Oh, you can't fool me with that smile. That's the smile your father uses when he's hurting and he's trying to hide it."

I can't bring myself to tell her everything, but I do venture a question. "You and Finias have encountered binding spells and curses before, haven't you?"

"Oh yes. A variety of them."

"What can be used to dissolve or break such things? I know the water of the Unending Pool breaks curses, but is there anything else

that could have the same effect? And where could I find water from the Unending Pool? Is there any in the city?"

She frowns. "Are you in danger, Killian? Because if you are, I swear I'll—"

"It's not me," I assure her. "It's a friend. I can't say more than that."

"I think your father has some of the sacred water," Clara says. "I'll fetch it for you. As for the rest… You could try kissing this *friend* of yours. A kiss of pure, selfless affection can be surprisingly powerful against dark magic." She smiles.

I can feel my face growing hot. "The water is all I need."

"Very well. If you want more information, you could ask one of the stewards of the Royal Reliquary. They have more expertise than either Finias or I."

It doesn't take her long to find the vial of water from the Unending Pool. I thank her, tuck it into my pocket, and portal back to my own cottage with the single cinnamon roll.

Thanks to my unique parentage, my cum has other properties besides its healing power—specifically its taste, which is very similar to vanilla icing and will hopefully make it more palatable to my protégé. I don't think she realizes how often she coughs, or how dangerous the condition of her lungs really is. When she came on my tongue last night, I could hear a sharp wheeze in her rapid breathing. I'm determined to do all I can to repair the damage done to her body. Since it's an ongoing issue, not an old wound, my essence should have a regenerative effect.

I'm already getting hard just thinking about my cum in her mouth. I set the plate I'm carrying down on a table and pull out my cock, running my hand along it as I picture the girl's beautiful breasts. They're absolutely luscious, full and plump and smooth, with pert nipples. Fondling them last night was one of the best experiences of my life, and I don't have to picture them for very long before my stomach tightens, a chill runs over my skin, and my cock pulses with pure ecstasy.

Carefully I aim my release at the unfrosted cinnamon roll, jetting thick white cum onto its surface. I take a moment to settle

my breathing and put my cock away; then I warm the roll with a little magic and create a portal to my protégé's house.

When I appear in the kitchen, I listen for a moment to ensure that the other members of the household have left. All is silent… so silent, in fact, that I begin to worry for my girl. Where is she?

I pick up on her scent and follow it to the front entrance of the house. She's slumped against the door, fast asleep and white as bone. Dark circles are painted beneath her eyes. She looks painfully thin and frail, and my heart breaks anew. I want nothing more than to cuddle her, care for her, and protect her, from now until the day my spirit leaves my body and joins the everlasting stars.

The depth and power of that protective instinct frightens me a little. I've never experienced such a violent yearning for anyone.

Though I may long to prove my adoration with great and mighty deeds, what this girl truly needs from me is healing and strength. So I crouch before her, holding out the cinnamon roll, and I wait until her blue eyes blink open.

She questions me about the treat, and with a little prompting I reveal the true source of the "frosting" on the roll. She's disgusted at first, but to my surprise, she acclimates to the idea and eats every bite. My cock is painfully hard by the time she's done, but I find all the satisfaction I need simply watching her, witnessing her delight at how much better and stronger she feels.

With one problem solved, I proceed to the issue of the anklet. I apply the water my mother gave me directly on the band, sprinkling it generously, but it does nothing at all.

A kiss of pure affection or true love might have some effect. I'm not sure how pure or true my affection is, but I wish for the girl's freedom with every beat of my heart.

I've already kissed her mouth to seal our bargain. For the removal of the anklet, perhaps a more direct application is required. I steel myself and press my lips to the metal, knowing the agony it will cause me.

The surface of the anklet burns worse than troll whiskey, worse than a Midwinter's Eve bonfire. My lips are instantly charred black, and skin flakes off when I touch my mouth. My protégé panics over

the injury and chastises me so fiercely that it's clear she must like me, at least a little. I would give myself a thousand wounds to elicit more proof of her affection.

To my chagrin, my kiss has no effect on the anklet.

I design a more revealing dress for her this time, and despite her initial surprise, she likes it, naughty darling that she is.

I almost forget the shoes again.

When she leaves in her carriage, I struggle with myself for a quarter of an hour before I mutter, "Fuck it," and portal to the royal library to wait for her. I am not the good Faerie I thought I was, because I can't resist the opportunity to wear the King's form and see her again.

I pace the length of the library, picturing how she looked last night—the mischievous glee on her face when she cut far too close to the deadline I gave her. I imagine what it would be like to chase her through the palace, throw her to the floor, and fuck her senseless in front of every guard, guest, and servant within sight.

When she finally slips into the library, my whole body thrills and glows. I have to hide in the shadows until I can control the reaction.

She blushes so prettily when I reveal my presence to her, and she gives me head—her first time. Instead of making her swallow, I mark her breasts and gown with my seed and scent. Then I lick my own cum from her skin, because I can't risk her tasting the vanilla flavor and discovering my trickery.

She will hate me so much when she finds out. Worse than I hate myself. But tonight, she comes in my palm, and then I fuck her against the bookshelves. While I'm thrusting inside her sweet cunt, the anklet burns me, and I have to shift her leg down so the metal band presses against my clothing, not my skin.

She comes a second time, with gasping sobs of grateful relief. The yearning to kiss her sweet mouth is too great to resist, so I crush my burnt lips to hers. It hurts worse than anything I've ever felt, so much that my body shakes and tears trickle down my cheeks. I have to grip the shelves to keep from screaming.

The kiss is worth the anguish.

When she asks to see the secret vault in the library, I nearly panic. Thankfully my variant of the Wretched Sight allows me to perceive its location. I use a quick spell to open the vault, and I spend hours there with her, searching through volumes of human lore about Fae magic. Most of it is incorrect information, but there are a few helpful paragraphs, particularly about weapons that can slice through objects imbued with dark spellwork.

It's during our research session that I realize how intelligent the girl really is. Not only does she read well, she accumulates the information quickly and analyzes it accurately. She makes a few comments aloud while she's reading, and I observe that her brain instantly tucks away the most useful bits of information and discards the rest.

When the clock strikes midnight, I've never been so furious with the passage of time. And yet I'm pleased too, because even though our quiet research session is over, I still have one more opportunity to see her, this time as myself.

I portal to her house and pace the halls for half an hour, chafing at the delay. Finally I go outside and walk along the lane, intending to meet her. If her carriage and her glamoured clothing haven't dissipated already, they will soon.

Moments later I see her, stark naked, running along the gravel drive through the freezing night. Her golden hair whips behind her and her breasts bounce as she races toward me. I have never seen anything so fiercely free and so heartbreakingly beautiful. I open my arms to her, but she only seizes my shoulder and marches me back inside, a scathing rebuke on her tongue.

Back in the house, I show the girl other glamoured forms I can take. Perhaps it's a way for me to salve my conscience, nudging her toward the truth without actually saying it—yet she still she does not suspect that I'm the King. Why would she?

I take the game too far, though, when I assume her stepmother's form. The girl's fear is immediate and visceral, and my suspicion is confirmed. The stepmother is her captor, her abuser, the villainous influence in her life.

In her desperation to get away from the illusion of her stepmother, the girl injures herself. When I offer to come in her mouth and heal the wound, she lets me—even bares her body to my view so I'll be able to climax more quickly. I tell myself it's a step forward in our true relationship, the one that involves no masks or glamours.

When I return home, I sleep well.

I don't sleep long, though, because she summons me again, this time with the pocket watch. She demands that I do her chores so she can rest. I tease her and feign reluctance, but truthfully I'm all too happy to assist. The huge mess she spoke of is a moment's work for me, and when I return to the cellar where she sleeps, I'm greeted by the heavy, honeyed aroma of arousal.

She's on the bed, with her hand between her legs. The moment I appear, she jerks her fingers out of her clothes, her cheeks turning a luscious red. Judging by how flustered she is, I must have been the subject of her fantasies. *Me*, not the King.

It gives me more satisfaction than I want to admit.

# 5

I spend the day traveling between realms, keeping the King alive in the mortal realm while researching dark magic in Faerie. After questioning the stewards of the Royal Reliquary in my uncle's palace and chatting with less savory characters in some of Torin's favorite haunts, I accumulate a collection of items to ply against the anklet, including the Void-Star dagger, which I purloin from King Lirannon's vault of forbidden weapons.

I try everything on the anklet that night, while the girl sits quietly with her foot on my thigh, watching the process. When none of it works, I lose my temper and annihilate everything. I've only been able to annihilate items twice before, and they were small, solitary objects. I've never destroyed multiple things at once. The intensity of both the emotion and the magic frightens me a little.

I've lost my heart already. I think perhaps I'm losing my mind as well.

Later I tell the girl what I've deduced about the anklet and its powers, and she tells me her name. Not Cinders, as the step-family calls her, but Celinda.

In return for her name, I give her mine.

# 6

On the night of the third ball, we fuck again, this time in the greenhouse, and when Celinda shows me her dominant side, I drown deeper in my love for her.

Afterward I'm forced to join the party for a while, but I don't stay long. Now that I've seen the conditions in which my darling lives, I feel compelled to remedy the situation as best I can, until I can resolve it entirely. So I procure items from both Faerie and from the attics of the King's palace, and with those supplies and my own magic, I transform the cellar into a livable space.

I have one more gift in mind for Celinda, and to obtain it, I must approach my mother again.

"You've been avoiding me," Clara says when I appear in her studio. She dips her brush in water and swirls it around, her eyebrows raised reproachfully.

I wince. "Perhaps."

"When you were tiny and you'd done something wrong, you would hide from me." She presses the paintbrush against the side of the jar, draining the excess water. "Have you done something wrong, Killian?"

"Yes," I admit. "But I'm fixing it."

"I know apologies are countercultural for the Fae," she says. "But your father has given them to me when they were owed, and I hope you'll do the same for this person you've wronged, whoever they are."

"I will." I clear my throat. "May I—that is, do you have any gowns you no longer need? Any fine dresses you're tired of? There's someone who could use a dress—a more permanent one than I can conjure."

My mother's brown eyes glow with delighted interest, but to her credit, she doesn't question me, even though I know she's dying to. She only says, "Go to my closet upstairs. You can have any of the six gowns on the far right. I've worn them all to multiple palace occasions, and I probably won't use them again."

"Thank you." I bound out of the room and up the stairs to my parents' room.

My father is lying on his stomach on the bed, sucking a lollipop and reading a gigantic book. His dragonfly wings wave gently in the air. "Killian! What a delightful surprise."

"I'm here to… um…" I clear my throat. "I need to borrow a dress."

"Planning to wear it?" he asks casually. "No judgment if that's your pleasure. I won't lie, I've worn a dress for Clara before."

"God-stars, please don't," I say despairingly. "How many times have Úna and I asked you not to tell us about your sex life?"

"About a million." He grins, every sharp tooth showing.

I shake my head, open my mother's closet, and sort through the dresses on the far right, selecting a turquoise gown that looks perfect for Celinda.

"Good choice," says my father.

After a moment's consideration, I pose a question that has been gnawing at my mind. "Remember when I vowed before the god-stars that I would never kill a human being?"

His face sobers. "I remember."

"Is it true that if I break that vow, I might die?"

"It is absolutely true." He looks very stern now, and deeply concerned. "Don't break it. If you need someone killed, I'll do it. Or your mother will."

"No, it's not… that is, there are other risks involved." I chew my lip, wondering if I should tell him everything. But he has solved so many problems for me throughout my life, and my pride won't let me yield this one to him. I'm ashamed of the mess I've made, and I'm equally determined to get through it on my own, no matter how painful or confusing it may be. "I have it under control."

His yellow eyes narrow, unconvinced. "Do what you must, but come to me if you need my help."

I step through a portal abruptly, without replying. Unkind of me, perhaps, but I find it increasingly hard to look to him for assistance. He's far more powerful and capable than I am, while at the same time being unpredictable, sarcastic, and rather Unseelie in his methods. I have no idea how he would respond if I told him everything, or if he would understand the weight of guilt I carry over the lie I'm living.

I leave the dress for Celinda and return to the palace. Ever since the Prince commented on my altered behavior during our conversation in the greenhouse, I have decided I must do a better job of governing until such time as the King's demise can be revealed.

Guiding an entire kingdom is a far more complex task than I could have imagined. With each passing hour and each fresh realization of the multi-layered problems the country faces, I gain a new appreciation for my uncle Lirannon and his role as High King—although possessing magic and a bevy of skilled advisors lightens his burden quite a bit, I'd imagine.

As the interim King of this mortal land, I can't employ magic except in the most subtle and imperceptible of ways. Besides which, I have to conserve my energy to maintain my glamour, while also saving some energy for whatever Celinda might need. Since I gifted her my mother's gown, I won't have to make her a dress for the fourth ball, but I plan to check in with her at the usual time, once her family has left the house.

I become so immersed in the work of governance that I barely notice the hours slipping by. I'm poring over a border map when I feel an insistent buzz through my body, the unmistakable sign of a summons. Each object I've charmed has its own energy signature, which I can recognize after the first summons, so I know immediately it's Celinda's watch calling me. As if that weren't enough confirmation, I hear her pained whisper in my head: *Killian, please.*

When I search her location with my Wretched Sight, I realize she's not at home. She's already on the palace grounds, outside in the cold, shrinking in the shadow of a huge topiary.

I shoo my servants and bodyguards out of the study, close the door, and drop my kingly glamour before portaling to Celinda on the snowy front lawn of the palace.

A rank stench fills my sensitive nostrils as I approach her, but it barely registers because I can also smell blood.

"Celinda?" I walk faster.

She drops the cloak she's wearing, and I can see it all—her beautiful skin, chafed raw and bloody. The gown I gave her, torn and tattered.

Someone has hurt her… or forced her to harm herself.

"Oh fuck," I breathe between clenched teeth. I want to hug her, to comfort her, but she shrinks, cautious of her injuries, and I redirect my emotion into fury. "I'll fucking kill that woman."

"You can't, and you know it," Celinda says. "Just help me, please."

Again that soft, broken plea. I'm furious and torn and wretched inside, agonized on her behalf, but her request refocuses my thoughts, gives me something useful to do.

I dispel the foul odor, mend the dress, and add additional touches of artistry, like a pair of glittering dragonfly wings that make Celinda look beautifully Fae. The wings resemble those of my sister and my father. With them, I mark her as mine. Part of *my* family, since hers has rejected her.

She's still in pain, though. I could heal her with one of my father's candies, but if I return to fetch one now, my father might

there, and he'll have questions I'm not ready to answer. If Celinda will let me, I'd rather be the instrument of her recovery.

"Now I need to heal you," I tell her.

"Please," she whispers. "And quickly. I have to go in a few minutes."

It's an invitation to come in her lovely mouth again, but my body won't cooperate. I'm too full of rage and sorrow—there's no room for lust.

"Fuck." I tilt my forehead against hers. "I'm so angry with your stepmother… I don't think I can get hard enough to do this."

"Please." She kneels in the snow, in the lovely gown, with the wings glittering at her back, and she places her slim fingers over my crotch, caressing me through the fabric of my pants. A tingling response runs through my cock, a glimmering arousal that spreads and increases as she continues to stroke me.

Despite her pain, there's a grateful tenderness in the way she touches me. Her caress is affectionate, and that, more than anything else, fills me with a heady blend of lust and hope.

She exposes my cock to the cold air for only a second before sheathing it in the warm, wet tunnel of her mouth and throat. Her soft sigh of pleasure drives me mad and stiffens my cock to almost painful hardness.

She's enjoying me. *Me*, not the King.

After several seconds of enthusiastic sucking, she murmurs, "Sorry for using you this way."

"Don't fucking apologize," I tell her. "I would give you much more of myself if you'd let me. I'd give you anything—" I break off with a gasp as she picks up speed, her head bobbing as she thrusts my cock faster into her mouth, and I groan aloud. "Fuck yes… just like that."

The damn girl has magic in those pretty lips, magic in her dancing tongue. I come hard in her mouth, and she sucks on me greedily, drinking every drop of my healing cum.

She drains me so well I can barely stand upright when she lets me go. My legs nearly give way as I'm buttoning my pants. "God-stars, that was exquisite."

At her request, I lay a second glamour upon her, intended only for the eyes of her step-family, so they can't perceive that I've healed her and repaired her dress. To their eyes, she will remain damaged, and I smile darkly as I imagine how confused they'll be when the Prince and his guests continue to treat Celinda with respect and admiration.

As it turns out, there is something I must fetch from home, after all. Celinda's stepmother has commanded her to be rude to the Prince, and I must find something to prevent her from offending His Highness tonight. While I cannot subvert the command, I can control how the Prince perceives Celinda's rudeness—if I can steal the right spell from my father's shop.

Over the past several decades, Finias has grown more meticulous in his record-keeping. The spells he designs are far more precise and complex than the ones he used to create, and they often require specific amounts of very rare ingredients, so he measures carefully and keeps track of every gumdrop, every stick of licorice, every cookie, tart, or piece of candy he creates, along with what magical effects they have. His reputation as a master spell-crafter has grown exponentially since my sister was born, and his name now appears in several tomes of magical lore and Fae history, sometimes with an entire chapter devoted to him.

With that notoriety comes unwanted attention from spies, thieves, and black-market dealers of magic, which in turn has made Finias more cautious with his wares. The unfortunate result is that he gets very upset when Úna or I purloin anything from his stores. We still do it occasionally, but we try to ask first, unless we need something urgently.

In this case, I need something urgently.

When I portal into the spell shop, it's dark and empty, and the adjoining studio is also shadowed and silent. My parents are probably somewhere in the residential part of the house. I create two floating orbs of light to dance over my head and illuminate my search.

"If I were a flattery spell, where would I be?" I mutter, walking behind the counter and pulling out the small drawers one by one.

Before I get very far, Finias appears in the doorway, his hair ruffled and his eyes snapping with golden fury. Judging by the cobweb of pink leather straps he's wearing, he and my mother were involved in one of their games. When he sees that I'm the intruder in his shop, he sighs and conjures a purple silk robe which he swirls around himself.

"You know I have alarms now, Killian," he says.

"To keep out thieves and scoundrels, not your own son."

His mouth twitches as he struggles not to smile. "You wouldn't be my son if you didn't have a bit of the scoundrel in you. What are you looking for?"

"Something that will make a person hear only flattering words, no matter what is said in their presence. Just for a few hours. I think you created something like that last year."

He nods, fluttering his wings and rising to a shelf near the ceiling, from which he takes a small jar. "I did indeed. I handed out these chocolates at a very dull meeting of the High Court and spent a most delightful afternoon insulting everyone without them realizing it." He chuckles at the memory.

"Can you spare one?"

"For yourself?" He lands lightly, his eyes piercing mine.

"For a friend of mine who's in trouble."

"It seems you're willing to do a great deal for this *friend*. Is this the person you were willing to kill for?"

I chew my lip and glance away. It's as good as an admission.

Finias opens the jar, removes a ball of chocolate studded with peppermint chips, and presses it into my palm. "Be careful. Love is a wicked and wonderful thing."

"I'm careful."

"And do me a favor… don't portal directly into the shop from now on. Otherwise the defensive charms detect a surge of powerful magic, and I have to investigate immediately before the perpetrator is automatically annihilated." He grins cheerfully with all his sharp teeth. "I'd hate to lose you."

"No shit," I mutter.

He laughs and saunters out of the shop, on his way back to Clara. I put the spell in my pocket and head into the foyer of the house, intending to create a portal from there… but before I can do so, someone raps on the door.

Not wanting to disturb my parents yet again, I open the door myself and discover Torin standing on the doorstep, his shoulders slouched and his hands in his pockets, looking particularly morose.

"Fuck you, Kil," he growls. "I've been looking for you everywhere. You haven't come by in ages. What's going on with your protégé? I'm starved for news."

"Are you alright?" I frown, noting the clammy pallor of his skin. "Are you ill again?"

"No," he snarls. "I'm goddamn bored. Ever since you met that pretty little victim of yours, we haven't gone anywhere interesting together. I swear I shall die if I have to languish in that palace one more day."

"Victim?" I exclaim. "She's not my victim, Torin. And there are plenty of ways for you to travel elsewhere if the palace is not to your liking. I've been busy ruling a kingdom and—"

"And fucking the girl." He snorts. "She must be good. God-stars, I need a really remarkable fuck. I had a halfway decent chambermaid yesterday, and a young lord the day before that, but neither was worth remembering. Are you going to invite me in? You must tell me everything about your life. It's far more interesting than mine is at present."

I glance over my shoulder. "My parents are… busy. If we step outside I can talk for a moment, but then I must go."

"A moment is better than nothing." He smiles, but his blue eyes remain shadowed.

I should probe deeper, find out what's troubling him. But there are so many troubles crowding my mind that I fear I don't have room for more. He has other people in whom he can confide, surely. And if his distress continues, I can turn my full attention to him once the situation with Celinda's anklet is resolved… after I've figured out how to save her.

# 7

I appear at the fourth ball as a human version of myself, recognizable to Celinda, but not so Fae in appearance that I attract attention from anyone else. My sole purpose is to get the spelled candy into her hand—and yet I find myself lingering, loath to relinquish the bliss of dancing with her.

Celinda's fingers slip between mine like we were crafted to fit together. The shift and sway of her body is the sweetest torture, and when she looks at me, breathless, bright-eyed, and expectant, like she wants me to kiss her right there on the dance floor, I nearly go mad with happiness.

I hold her for a few exquisite moments, and then I give her the candy and let her go.

Once I'm in the adjoining hallway, I become the King again and proceed to my chambers, where I let it be known to my guards and servants that I'm retiring for the night and may not rise early in the morning. There is something I must do in Faerie, and I'm not sure how long it will take.

My love for my protégé requires that I leave no stone unturned, no avenue unexplored if it might lead to her freedom. I've exhausted

all the artifacts and spells I could lay my hands on, and it's time to face the fact that the Wraith's Scythe might be Celinda's last chance. There is plenty of lore in Faerie about its ability to cleave anything asunder, including objects infused with the darkest of magic.

But according to what I've learned since Celinda first mentioned it to me, the scythe is located in Wight's Marsh, in a distant corner of the Unseelie Kingdom, a region beyond the reach of the treaty between the Seelie and Unseelie monarchs. From my current position in the mortal world, I can perceive the general area, but I can't see anything distinctly, nor can I determine the exact location of the scythe. My Wretched Sight isn't much help when it comes to finding specific objects or locating people with whom I'm not magically connected or blood-related.

With a sigh, I portal to my cottage in Faerie and open the closet where I keep a couple of swords, an ax, and a whip. I'm not much of a fighter, but life in Faerie demands a certain familiarity with weapons. I choose the whip, which is similar to the one my mother wields. It's shorter than hers, and tends to be less reliable. In fact, I could swear it has a mind of its own.

"Are you going to behave for me this time?" I mutter as I coil it up and attach it to my belt. It pulses bright green in response. I don't know if that's a *yes* or not.

I could bring one of the swords, I suppose, but I'm not much good with them. Torin is the swordsman of the family—a born fighter. Takes after both his parents in that respect.

There's nothing else for it but to portal to Wight's Marsh and hope for the best.

# 8

Hoping for the best did fuck-all. I got chewed to the bone by marsh-wights, and I lost my whip—though I did manage to get my hands on the Wraith's Scythe.

After everything I went through to retrieve the weapon for Celinda, watching it fail against the anklet drains the last dregs of hope from my heart… a heart which is beating, raw and exposed, through the cage of my gnawed rib-bones as I lie on Celinda's cot in the cellar.

There's one bright spot in the torment: Celinda is beside herself with concern for me. By some miracle of the god-stars, she *kisses* me. Not for a bargain, but because she *wants* to. And then, when she finds out that sex can speed the healing process, she climbs on my cock… because she cares about me.

At least that's what I hope and believe, until it's over and she says casually that she was happy to do me a favor. Apparently she didn't sense the soaring bliss between us, the beautiful connection of her soul and mine during sex. She simply needed me on my feet in good condition, so I could prepare her for the next ball. That was

her only purpose in fucking me, and that knowledge hurts worse than the marsh-wights' teeth.

Spurred by a vicious sort of self-pity, I make her a dress from the blood my body spilled for her. And then, weak from wounds that are still healing, I portal from the cellar of her house to the King's bedroom.

I've been gone too long. I have to pretend that I sneaked out of the palace for a tryst and spent many hours with my secret lover. The chambermaids seem to buy the excuse but I suspect my guards do not fully believe me. I don't have time to convince them, though, because I'm supposed to have dinner with my "son," Prince Brantley, and none other than his intended bride, Celinda herself.

My human blood has never made itself more apparent than it does tonight, as my stomach curdles with acidic anxiety over the prospect of sharing a meal with them.

When Celinda arrives, she's so obviously nervous that my own unrest eases a bit. Every minute that I watch her throughout the meal, I grow angrier with her and more frustrated with myself.

This situation is untenable. I can't keep pretending to be the King while she's being courted by my "son." I can't keep deceiving her like this. I can't linger in her life, giving her a false hope of freedom, when in truth of I have no way of ensuring her liberty.

I'm going to tell her the truth. Tonight.

As soon as the meal is over, I speak up. "Celinda, there's a chamber prepared for you upstairs if you need to freshen up before the ball. I'll escort you there, if you like."

I half-expect her to protest, to do the noble thing and put some distance between herself and her soon-to-be fiancé's father. But she merely replies, "That would be lovely, thank you."

Waving away the guards who try to follow us, I guide her upstairs to a spare bedroom, which is kept ready for visiting dignitaries. I'm ready to confess, ready to end this pretense and face the consequences.

And yet, once we're in the room and she turns to face me, every word I'd planned to say flies out of my head, and I'm left

speechless, staring at the beautiful girl who owns my heart, my body, and my mind.

Once I tell the truth, she won't want me. She won't ever touch me again. She'll dismiss me from her life, and she'll be right to do it.

Her scent suffuses every breath I take, sets my blood on fire. There's a pulling sensation deep in my bones—an irresistible, magnetic force that draws me toward her.

I remember my Aunt Louisa telling Úna and me the story of how King Lirannon crawled to her through a snowstorm, even though his eyes were blinded, his body was broken, and his sense of smell was gone. The bond between them was so powerful that even the most devious magic could not break it.

I tell myself that's how I feel about Celinda. That my blood roars for her, that my flesh screams for her, that I ache to be inside her because we're meant for each other, she and I. A voice in my mind warns me that this is selfishness, not love, yet I don't heed the warning.

When I speak, it isn't a confession. "Kneel before your King, Celinda."

"Your Majesty, we should talk," she says, but she's eyeing my hands, watching my fingers as I remove my belt and unfasten my pants. She wants me, too—craves me against her better judgment. The blood-red gown crumples around her as she kneels for me.

"Don't come on my dress this time," she murmurs. "I'll swallow it."

Oh… fuck. My pre-cum has no taste, but if I release fully into her mouth, she'll recognize the vanilla flavor. She'll know the truth of my identity instantly. Coward that I am, it's too much for me to face.

Swearing silently, I stuff my cock back into my pants and retrieve my belt. "We can't do this. Not now."

She frowns. "How responsible of you."

"I simply realized that as much as I want to make a mess of you, I should wait until after the ball."

"Until I'm engaged to your son?" She gets to her feet, her voice stricken with despair.

"He may ask you," I say. "You do not have to accept."

Part of me wants Celinda to break, to declare her love for the King recklessly, to reject his son. Even if the King isn't *me*, exactly, it would be at least somewhat gratifying to my pride.

But she doesn't answer.

"Unless you *do* plan to accept," I say.

Her lips tighten. I can't tell if she's reluctant to confess the truth, or if she's bound by her stepmother's will.

"I see." I keep my tone cold and even. "Then I will leave you to prepare for the ball. You and I will dance, and after that, we will be nothing to each other except polite acquaintances, and eventually, relatives. You will be my… *daughter*."

I speak the word on purpose, convinced that it will drive her mad. When she doesn't react, I can feel my frustration ebbing away, leaving only weariness in its place—weariness, and the pain of wounds that, beneath my glamour, are not quite healed. I can't help releasing a sigh, heavy with the ache of everything I have tried and failed to do over the past few days.

Celinda's face changes and she leaps for me, catching me in a hug and kissing me full on the mouth with such passionate force I nearly stagger backward. But I manage to stand firm and wrap my arms around her in return.

She kisses me wildly, fervently, painfully. It's a tormented kiss, a wordless goodbye.

What would the King say in this moment? What concern would he share with her if this ruse were real? What threads remain left untied between them that he would want to secure?

"Your friend," I murmur against her mouth. "The one for whom you were searching the Faerie spellbooks…"

"Never mind that right now." She kisses me again, more tenderly this time. Her tongue travels the inside of my mouth—and then I feel her hesitate a moment before cautiously tracing the shape of my teeth and tongue. Something in the tension of her body alarms me.

I'm glamoured to look and feel like the King, but is it possible that I don't feel like him *inside*? Could her tongue recognize the true shape of mine, or the taste of my mouth?

I pull away, ending the kiss abruptly. “Goodbye,” I tell her, and I leave the room.

The second I’m in the hallway, I portal back to the King’s chamber. When the servants knock several minutes later, I let them in and submit to their ministrations as they prepare me for a ball I cannot avoid, where I’ll see Celinda again. Like a fucking idiot, I promised to dance with her. I shouldn’t fulfill that promise, but it’s too thrilling a temptation to resist.

My life at the moment feels like a bit of flotsam from a broken ship, a piece of wreckage circling round and round the lethal center of a whirlpool. Though I know the inevitable end, I can’t seem to break free from the sucking force of the current. I have no defense against the desire to be with Celinda, to savor her scent, to feel the responsive tremor of her body within my grasp.

I am the King and the King is me. She wants us both, but she craves him more freely and openly, and I’m addicted to her desire.

So I dance with her at the ball, drinking in her sweet scent, trying to memorize the feel of her waist beneath my palm, the sensation of her fingers laced with mine. I want to treasure these memories until the end of my existence.

“You were right,” she says lightly as we dance. “The shoes are quite comfortable.”

I reply automatically, with a smile. “I told you they would be.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, I realize my mistake.

*Shit.*

*Gods-fuck*.

Her eyes are wide with triumphant horror, with enraged betrayal.

In my own soul, two vastly different emotions clash together. Guilty sorrow, because I know the wrong I’ve done—and a sense of relief, because the deception is finally over. My wickedness has been exposed, for better or worse. I am revealed and undone before her, and all I can do now is try, with my heart and my body, to make amends.

# 9

"She is furious," I tell Torin. "She has every right to be, and I owe it to her to respect her wishes and stay away. But I won't leave her entirely. I can't, not when she needs me. Not when the climax of all this is so close at hand."

"What are you going to do?" Torin eyes me, sipping his wine. He looks paler than ever, and there's a hectic light in his blue eyes. When I arrived in his suite today, I pressed him to tell me what's wrong, but he refused. Instead he demanded to know the latest chapter in my tale.

Perhaps, if I confide in him fully, he'll open up to me. So I tell him my whole plan, including the part where I will almost surely die from wearing the anklet.

"The fuck, Killian?" he exclaims. "I can't let you go through with this. What would your parents do without you? God-stars, what would *I* do? You're not only my cousin, motherfucker—you're my best friend. Are you doing this out of some ridiculous sense of misplaced guilt?"

"It's not misplaced," I retort. "Torin, I deserve this. Think about what I did—how I deceived her. The only way I can atone for that is

by giving her everything I have. I've thought about this, trust me, and it's the only way I can save her. I'm *glad* to do it."

"I'll tell Finias," Torin says through clenched teeth. "Or I'll tell my father. They'll stop you."

"They can't," I tell him, more quietly. "None of you can walk between the realms like I can. In the blink of an eye, I can be beyond anyone's reach."

"A fucking unfair advantage, if you ask me," he growls.

"Maybe. But in this case, it enables me to sacrifice myself for the woman I love."

"Love." His lip curls in a sneer.

"Yes, *love*. I love her, I adore her. I would kill for her, and since I can't do that, I'll die for her instead."

"And you're telling me this, why? To cause me pain?"

"Because you demanded to hear my news," I reply. "And because someone should know what happened to me, in case I don't return. Someone will have to tell my parents, and Úna."

Torin stares at me, his eyes fierce and bright. "Laying this burden on me is unfair. You know that."

"I do."

He gets up from the sofa and stalks over to a large oval mirror on the wall. For several moments he stares at himself—skin as pale as snow, lips blood-red, hair black as night, and eyes like two blue stars. His beauty seems to have become more dramatic lately, and the effect apparently pleases him, because he gives his reflection a dreadful, secretive smile before turning back to me.

"If you die, I'll pass on your message to your family," he says. "But if you do come back, I'll want something in exchange for the emotional torture you've put me through."

"I expected no less."

"I want to return to Sybaris," he says. "I left something of myself there, and I need it back."

Frowning, I tilt my head. "Explain."

"Maybe someday. It's a long and sordid tale, having to do with a stolen heart and a poisoned apple. And now, cousin, you'd best be gone, before I think better of doing you this favor and decide to call

for King Lir. I'll wager he's the only one who could interfere with your portal magic, and he will do it if I ask him to. Despite my faults, my parents are quite fond of me."

"I'm going," I assure him. "Tonight I will either set my darling free, or perish in the attempt. Either way, know that I love you." I clamp a hand on his head and tousle his black hair, laughing when he knocks my hand away.

"Begone, lovesick idiot," he grumbles. "And when you survive, remember to come back here and grant me my wish."

"It's a bargain." I spit in my palm, and he does the same. As we clasp hands I sense a ripple of unfamiliar magic from him, but he pulls his hand away before I can fully explore it.

# 10

I know Celinda's wicked stepmother has chained her with an entire list of commands. There's nothing Celinda can do to stop the royal wedding, or the transference of the anklet. My plan is set and my fate determined, but I can't shake the thought that if I had more time, perhaps I could devise an alternate way to set Celinda free. So on the morning of the wedding, I make one final attempt to circumvent the stepmother's will, by appealing to the Prince's handsome bodyguard, Winston.

I find Brantley and Winston in one of the parlors on the palace's main floor, where the Prince is doing a last-minute check of the route he and his new bride will take through the city this afternoon.

Winston seems shocked when I enter the room and pull him aside. Perhaps the real King never interacted much with his son's personal guard.

"Brantley is making a terrible mistake," I tell Winston quietly. "You may think I've never noticed how much you care for him, but I have. The way he talks about you—it's clear you're his favorite companion, and I think you could be much more to him, if he would

only open his eyes and see what's so obvious to those who know him best."

Winston swallows hard and glances across the room at the Prince. "My King, if I have ever behaved inappropriately—"

"No, no, nothing like that," I assure him. "Your behavior has been exemplary. Perhaps it's time to be a little less exemplary and a little more honest." I nod toward Brantley. "Tell him how you feel."

Winston frowns. "Your Majesty, he's getting married in a few hours."

"All the more reason to take a chance. What have you got to lose? I'll come with you so he knows your confession has my full support."

A determined desperation overtakes the bodyguard's face, and he nods. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Over the next few minutes I bear witness to the confession—a clumsy yet heartfelt one—but there's another witness to the impulsive kiss that follows. Celinda, passing through the hallway outside, sees Winston kiss her fiancé on the mouth.

When I smile at her, Celinda glances away immediately and continues on, surrounded by her maids and step-family. I've seen the horrific dress they plan to make her wear today, and inwardly I determine to correct that atrocity and make her trip down the aisle the most stunning processional anyone in this kingdom has ever witnessed.

But my creative visions of Celinda's alternate wedding gown are disrupted by Brantley's pained gasp as he breaks the kiss with his bodyguard.

"Winston," the Prince exclaims, looking thoroughly shaken. "This is beyond anything I—this is my *wedding day*."

"I know," the bodyguard replies tightly. "That's why I had to speak out. Your father encouraged me to do so."

"Father?" Brantley looks at me, his face taut with uncertainty. "You always told me I must have a wife and produce heirs."

"An old-fashioned notion," I scoff. "You can adopt a child."

"But—that isn't what you said." Brantley's voice is strained. "I thought you would be furious if I—" He breaks off, spinning on his

heel and stalking away.

For a moment I think my plan has succeeded, and that the wedding—and my impending death—will be delayed. But then Brantley says, in a tone of cold resignation, "Celinda is a good woman. She deserves a good life, and I have promised her my hand in marriage. She will be my partner and the mother of my children. I am a man of my word."

Winston's face hardens, a mask over the pain that must be ravaging his heart. "As you wish, my Prince."

Well… fuck that plan. There's no time to try another, which means tonight I will endure the agony of the anklet.

*I welcome it. I deserve it.*

But Brantley doesn't deserve a life of denying who he is, so when the time comes for me to make my royal speech at the start of the wedding, I take a moment to speak the words he needs to hear from his father. By tomorrow morning, Brantley will know that the King is dead. What I have to say cannot allay that grief, but I hope it helps alleviate any doubt the Prince might feel about his father's respect or approval.

The wedding ceremony is less painful than I expected it to be. Unlike Fae life-knotting ceremonies or mating bonds, mortal marriages are easily dissolved. I have much greater worries than a few promises presided over by a human bishop.

Afterward, I perform as the King throughout the rest of the day. I remain present for the speeches and festivities, yet I do not center myself. This celebration is for Prince Brantley, a man I've come to respect, and even though Celinda was forced into this, the festivities are for her as well.

Her gaze keeps finding me, over and over. She seeks me out restlessly, and she always seems more peaceful once she catches a glimpse of my face. The attention gives me hope that her forgiveness is not entirely out of my reach.

Before the newlyweds retire for the night, I leave the gathering and shut myself into the King's chambers, giving my servants strict orders not to disturb me. From the King's suite, I portal to the library, remove the real King's body from its hiding place, and

transport it back to the royal bedchamber. There I dress the corpse in nightclothes and arrange it under the blankets.

Next I create a portal into Brantley's study and wait there in the darkness. From my conversations with the Prince, I know that he reads every night, and since I've taken every book off his nightstand, he'll have to come into the study to fetch one. My ring's secret compartment has been refilled with sleeping powder, so it will be an easy matter to render Brantley unconscious and stow him out of sight while I take his place.

Everything unfolds according to my plan: putting Brantley to sleep, returning to Celinda in the guise of her new husband, facing her stepmother, and finally enduring the agony of the anklet.

What I don't expect is Celinda's determination to save me. She is relentless, unyielding, and with her encouragement and my final shred of strength, I manage to create what I expect to be my last portal: a doorway into my father's shop in Faerie.

The next several moments are blurred with pain and the sound of my own screams, but I'm dimly aware of my mother cutting off my leg to save me, followed by my father giving me the strongest healing sweets in his arsenal.

Then I'm in the guest room on the first floor of my parents' house, and it's quiet, and Celinda is with me, grasping my face and saying fiercely, "Do you realize you almost *died*?"

"I'm quite aware of the fact," I reply with a weak smile. "I figured it was likely, and I was prepared for it."

"But *I* wasn't!" she exclaims. "Killian, how would your parents have felt about that? About you dying for some human girl you barely know?"

"Some human girl? You think that's all you are to me? Fuck that, Celinda. You know better."

She's breathing hard, her cheeks pink. "What exactly do you think I know?"

I reach for her hand and gently uncurl her clenched fingers. "You are my madness. I fucking lost my mind over you. That's not your fault, I know. But when I lost my mind, I lost my heart, too. I would die for you, Sin—I would *kill* for you if I had to. I understand

that you hate me for lying to you, and I can live with that, as long as I know that you're free."

"But I'm not free," she whispers. "I'm married to the Prince, and the King is dead. When I go back, I will have to wake Brantley and tell him his father is gone. I don't know how to do that, Killian. He'll be heartbroken. And then… I want the marriage annulled, but I can't do that to him. I'll have to stay with him, to comfort him…"

"I think he might seek comfort from someone else. The Prince has recently realized a few things about himself. He will grieve for his father, yes, but I don't think he will grieve the marriage."

"His bodyguard," Celinda says. "He's in love with his best friend, isn't he? And despite being so brilliant, he never saw the signs until now."

"Precisely." I smile a little, pleased at her perceptive nature. "And don't talk as if you're going back alone. I'm returning with you, though I won't be able to glamour myself as the King again. I've already placed his body in his bed, and the servants will find him there in the morning. He's been preserved by magic, so the death will seem recent. They'll think his heart failed while he slept. But I can take on an alternate glamour and remain nearby. I'll stay as long as you need me."

She strokes my fingers with her thumb. "Then you might be staying a long time."

I barely breathe, hardly daring to hope for the answer I crave. "How long?"

"Only until I die."

*Fuck yes.* "Is that so?"

"I have conditions, of course."

"Obviously."

"One—you will help me settle things at the palace. Two—once my annulment goes through, you'll bring me back to Faerie with you. I haven't seen much of it yet, but I'd like to. And three—I will forgive your great deception, if you will agree to take on the form of the King whenever I ask you to. For fun."

"What sort of fun?" I blink at her, feigning innocence.

“Don’t look at me like that, not after you asked me to *step* on you,” she says. “Your father thinks you’re this gentle, sweet soul, and you are, but you’re also a degenerate scoundrel. A depraved, lecherous fiend.”

“I like it when you call me names,” I murmur.

Her gaze lingers on my mouth with the expression of entranced desire she used to give the King during our dalliances. She’s looking at *me* with the same reckless abandon, that irresistible need.

“To be clear,” I whisper, “I love you.”

“I know.”

She doesn’t say it back to me, not yet, and I’m willing to wait as long as I must—years, perhaps, until she trusts me enough. But for now, I’m too weary to talk any more. Despite my father’s magic, my body has been ravaged, and it demands rest to complete the healing process.

Celinda seems to understand my need for sleep. She starts to rise from the bed, probably assuming I want her to leave. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I catch her arm. “Please. Stay with me.”

With a relieved sigh, she sinks back onto the bed and lies down, resting her golden head on my shoulder and placing her fingers on my chest. It’s a position of quiet trust, and for a moment I’m certain my heart will burst with joy.

And then she says, with soft certainty in her tone, “I love you.”

I suck in a quick breath, stunned by the agony of happiness. “After everything I did?”

“Yes.”

Devotion, adoration, and gratitude beyond words swell in my chest. Somehow I manage to say, “For the rest of my life, I will strive to be worthy of your love.”

Celinda snuggles closer to me, a contented sigh escaping her lips. “You already are.”

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